Shaft among the Jews

A NOVEL BY

ERNEST TIDYMAN

Author of the Screenplays for SHAFT and THE FRENCH CONNECTION

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John Shaft is back. Smooth, black, and deadly, the private eye whose initial recorded exploits (*Shaft*) established him as our first genuine superhero since James Bond, is on the prowl again, this time as the best-paid *shvartze* ever to set foot into the inner sanctums of New York's famed diamond district. His clients for this exotic adventure are a committee of Hassidim, orthodox Jews whom Shaft at first mistakes for a posse of cowboys. Diamond merchants all, they are concerned over certain inexplicable events—a few murders, some disappearances of sizable gem collections—in what is usually a tightly self-controlled and most explicable business. Impelled by dyspepsia for his newly decorated office and a promised fee beyond any he has ever imagined receiving, Shaft steps out intrepidly into a

(continued on back flap)

SHAFT

AMONG THE JEWS

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Ernest Tidyman

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CODMAN SQUARE

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for
Some of My Best Friends

Hold me in your love and kind regard
and I will take my comfort anywhere.

SHAFT

AMONG THE JEWS

1

SHAFT REGARDED his office with sympathy, sorrow, and some anger. An old friend had been murdered in his sleep. It was the same thing. The orange daybed shrieked all over the corner where it was supposed to wait quietly until he needed a place to crash. The bright blue carpeting was committing violence from wall to wall as well as end to end of the color spectrum.

"Oh, Jee-zus," he muttered, spinning his chair around, away from the see-through plastic desk that was a special agony to his senses, but almost lost in the abundance of his pain.

Turning away didn't help. En route, Shaft had been forced to take in another startling assessment of the stark white filing cabinets, the polished aluminum frame around his license as a private investigator, the pale blue telephone with its attached (and color-coordinated blue-gray) memo pad, the polished-steel abstraction that seemed to be lurching drunkenly across the small sidetable next to the daybed. . . . Even the window that looked out on the honky-tonk of Times Square at Forty-sixth Street was no help. The neon

splatter out there, enhanced by the darkness that seemed to descend right after lunch in November, was almost lost in the reflected glare of the disaster behind him.

Why, John Shaft wondered, had he let her talk him into this?

"Listen," he could have said, "I'll fuck the faggot and *you* redecorate the office. You know, have the walls painted or the floors swept or something. . . . Maybe you could get the cheap bastard who owns the building to clean out the crapper down the hall. I'd rather piss in a Tennessee gas station than go in there. . . ."

He hadn't. Instead, he had made the mistake of accepting her pretensions. It was the price of pussy. And now he was paying it in an atmosphere that jangled the nerves he was supposed to have assuaged with three weeks of stringing them out on the sands in Jamaica.

He turned the brown-black, oval face away from the window to scowl over his shoulder at the awfulness of it, and the blue and orange began playing tricks with his eyes, flicking the focus of his retina back and forth like an optic switch.

"God*damn*," he said aloud. How did he get into such shit?

"Hello . . . I understand you're a private eye," she had said in that soft, whispery voice that sounded like a child play-acting at being very nice. It was no child attached to the sound, though. She was tall, blonde, and slender, with a face that might have been carved carefully out of golden beeswax. She had spent a lot of the summer in the sun and it was still there.

"Yeah," he said. His eyes had done the normal thing before responding, counting the long legs, the slope of her breasts, and the lean and even turn of her arms and neck. It didn't bother her; she wasn't self-conscious about anything she had, and it was there to look at.

"Killed anybody lately?" she asked, hiding the smile with the rim of a highball glass.

One of those. They opened the wrong door someplace about six–eight years ago and all these goddamned game players came out.

"Only my appetite by coming to this collection of assholes," he said.

That got a nice flicker out of the back of her gray-blue eyes. Now she'd either figure him for decent competition and turn on the heat or run like hell for some less suspicious prey on the other side of the room, that store dummy type over there in the dark blue Cardin suit who wouldn't even feel the incision as his balls were being removed.

But she didn't do either.

"If you think you can breathe some life back into it," she said, "why don't we split for something more pleasant, then?"

"Yeah," he agreed, following her lead as she turned and began to move through the small crush of cocktail drinkers and gossip merchants who had gathered for this bash at the apartment of his actor friend, Rollie Nickerson. She had a nice ass, he thought, as she moved two or three people ahead of him. A great ass.

"Hey, brother, you goin' already?" Rollie asked as they snaked past the bar at the entrance of the kitchen. Nickerson, a tall, angular man who hadn't done much

in the theater since Abraham Lincoln and basketball players went out of style, could peer over the tops of assorted heads to the object of Shaft's attention.

"Yeah, John baby," he answered his own question, "you gone."

That's how he got into these things. Just like that. It was maybe the damnedest night of all the strange ones in his thirty years of them. And it wasn't over yet.

They had walked east through the West Side's smudgy, smelly middle Fifties—where Rollie Nickerson and virtually every other unsuccessful actor in New York lived. There was none of the hesitant pause of new acquaintances between them. She took his hand as soon as they hit the sidewalk. They stayed linked together that way until they fell into the San Marco, a small Italian place just west of Sixth.

"I don't know it," he said, holding the door.

"I've only been for lunch," she said. "But they really care about food."

He went through a steak and a pasta something on the side. She had anchovies and peppers, gave him a bite, and toyed with a salad. They talked about some things. What? He never remembered, exactly, except the idea came through that she wasn't playing games with him. Maybe it was just that she wasn't afraid of him or wanting to screw his head around for a variety of neurotic reasons. Maybe that was it; she was coming on straight. And there weren't many like that. They were so rare, in fact, that it took some doing to come back at them straight.

"Do you have any good music we could listen to?"

"Yeah," he said, "but . . ."

"Your apartment's a godawful mess, right?"

John Shaft had smiled. There was a disarming quality in the way it lighted the usually cold and noncommittal mask, deceptive as the smile of a man built on such wide, powerful lines along a six-foot frame. And there was a demoniacal cast to the smile provided by the scars he had accumulated . . . the bicycle chain stitching above the right eye, the knicks and slashes of the pistol-whipping he had taken in the search for Beatrice Persons a year ago . . . no, almost two now.

"It's not a mess," he defended the apartment. "It's just . . . confused."

"Mine's probably closer, anyhow. I'm on Sixty-fourth, between Madison and Park."

"That's a lot closer."

It kept occurring to Shaft that he should find out what her name was somewhere along the line. But the conversation never got there. She knew his. And he wasn't going to say anything like, "Okay, I'm John Shaft and I'm a private eye, now who and what are you?" It wasn't his style. There were too many things happening between them. What difference did the name make? He'd find out eventually or never. It still wouldn't make any difference. The reality of it was that she was sitting there, he was sitting here, and they were getting up to go to her apartment over on Sixty-fourth Street between Madison and Park because his apartment was . . . confused.

He had a momentary flash of the "confusion." He hadn't made the bed for three girls and two weeks. There was a Chemex filter full of three-day-old grounds on the stove. Every ashtray in the place was strangling

in the debris of spasmodic tensions. Smudged, smeared glasses containing the last drops of yesterday's celebrations were glued to the small tables and even the top of the refrigerator, and a Hindu firewalker probably wouldn't go across the floor in his bare feet without complaining bitterly.

They had walked to her place. It was nothing like his own, sitting on the relatively calm corner of Jane Street and Hudson, on the western frontier of Greenwich Village. Her building probably used to be a private home, converted fifteen or twenty years ago into a sandwich stack of small apartments squeezed between two huge slices of sandstone, one of them an elegant hotel, the other taken over as an embassy that had more meaning than the millionaire who built it.

The name on her door was A. Taylor-Davis.

"Which one are you?" he asked, in the heartland of the new marriage that consists of two people and one mailbox hyphen, following her into a large, high-ceilinged room that seemed to be all dark browns and golds with red and pink fabric splashes in pillows and draperies.

"All of them," she said over her shoulder, moving through the room and straight back to another that he could see to be a small bedroom when she touched on a light. "Amy Taylor-Davis. There's a hyphen between Taylor and Davis."

He was looking around the room. There was a circular table in the far corner diagonally opposite the door, covered with a bright gold tablecloth and holding a glob of ceramic that made a nice lamp, a collection of small silver photo frames of faces he couldn't see and

wouldn't recognize. There was a long, heavy-looking couch of dark brown suede on a stainless steel frame, and in front of that a low glass and stainless steel table, and under it a rich gold-colored Oriental rug that seemed to pull it all together. There was a big leather wingback chair with bright brass tacks trimming all its edges, and on the cream-yellow walls . . .

"John?"

He had been thinking that it was a rich room, a tasteful and expensive room. You see a room like that in a magazine sometimes. People wanted to know the difference between the rest of New York and the Upper East Side, tell them it was a room like this, because it said who the people were and what they were like. And he had also been thinking that if he sat down on the big brown couch and she sat down next to him, they were going to talk for an hour or so and he was going to try to score. Oh, yes, he was. Because she had one hell of an . . .

"John?"

It startled him. And he didn't startle easy. Did she want him in the bedroom? Didn't she know he was busy trying to figure out how to ball her on the brown couch two hours from now? He tossed the tan, belted raincoat on the couch and moved toward the sound of her voice.

She was standing in front of a dressing table mirror next to the bed, shadow-lighted in the dim light from the single small lamp, twisted around trying to see the back of her neck in the mirror. Her arms were raised and both her hands were around at the back of her neck at the catch of the zipper, a position that lifted her

breasts and thrust the slopes in rising peaks against the fabric of the light wool dress.

"Help me with this damned thing," she said.

Man, what the hell am I into? he wondered. Only briefly. The catch on the zipper really *was* stuck, and his fingers felt as big as bananas as he pulled and twisted at it for two minutes. Nothing.

"Force it. Tear it apart."

"It'll ruin the . . ."

"Rip the goddamned thing open," she said.

Shaft ripped. The stubborn zipper and the fabric parted at their mutual seam and the light wool slashed open on peach pink flesh to the beginning shadow of her bottom's round cheeks.

"I'll, uh—" The only thing to do was get out of there and let her repair the shambles.

She interrupted his apologies and his movements, turning toward him with a soft smile of shared conquest of the zipper, and began shrugging out of the remains of the dress as they spoke.

"Thank you." She was not wearing a brassiere. Her breasts were small, but perfect, firm cones. The nipples were dark, but not very dark, and he knew that they would be large in his hand or against his lips if and when she were aroused. "The dry cleaners do that to clothes." Her body was lean, and there was only the ripple of flesh, not fat, as she bent to lower the remains of the dress to the floor and step out of it. And her belly was flat, almost concave, in the pelvic hollow behind the brown-toned top of the pantyhose. She kicked the mound of torn wool toward a wastebasket that stood beside the dressing table and hooked her finger in that

last garment. He hadn't noticed until then that she had slipped out of her shoes. "There's a suit hanger in the armoire there. On the right. Why don't you hang your suit there?" Gauzy, clinging nylon went smoothly, silently down long columns of legs. He was startled on the level of astonishment: he thought for a moment that she had no pubic hair and then saw, when she straightened to toss the hose on a small chair in front of the dressing table, that it was so golden light as to be almost invisible against the light skin. "Over there." Nodding toward the cupboard, and turning away. She walked away from him toward the bed. A truly incredible ass, tilting upward toward him as she bent over the bed and pulled back the rich blue coverlet-comforter on butter-yellow sheets and pillows, raising a knee and climbing into the bed that way to settle back against a pillow. She found a cigaret in a small silver box on a stand beside the bed, lit it, and looked at him. Smiling. "Whenever you're ready, John."

Why should he feel slightly embarrassed? Ready? He was so ready he would probably have difficulty getting his tightly tailored trousers down over his royal readiness. "In the armoire there." She nodded toward it again. He went across to it, away from her, and opened the right-hand door and found the hanger. He took his jacket off, looking back at her, maybe to make sure she was still there. Well, fuck it. If that's the way it was, that's the way it was. "I didn't want to rush or charge into this or do a lot of groping or grabbing." He hooked the red silk tie on the armoire key temporarily, unbuttoned the shirt and slipped it off. His easy, almost time-dislocated pace puzzled him. He felt under a con-

trol, a governor on the racing engine of what he wanted, what he desired. Each foot rose with a slow heaviness to his hands, for a flicking of the laces and slipping out of them. "I want every detail of this with you, John—and I want you to have it, too, to savor it, drink deeply of it." Oh, Jesus, yes, he needed a drink. Of it, of anything. The trousers and the shorts came off with the slight difficulty he expected, and he stood there with them in his hand for a moment, trying to make sure the change didn't fall out of the pocket as he turned them upside down for hanging. "Mr. Shaft, did anyone ever tell you you are built like a brick shithouse?"

Did he walk to the bed? Or run? Or float? He floated. Never touched the floor at all, in the dreamy, creamy waves of movement that carried him to the bed. And there . . .

She moved a few inches away to make room for him. He felt the stallion surge of demand that has torn asunder civilizations for its immediate gratification. But he couldn't reach for her. She wouldn't let him.

"Don't fondle me, darling. I don't need it. I've been wet for you since I looked at you at the party. And thought of you inside me."

He would go insane. His eyes would pop and his brain would explode. His flesh would disintegrate under the pressure. There was no standing this. What was she doing? What did she want?

"Here. Get here on your knees."

Soft hands, fire-trailing exposed wires guided him to his knees before her as she drew up her long slender legs. Ankles, knees and thighs continued to rise and she held them toward the ceiling and then parted them

slightly. He was entranced by the ritual, man kneeling at his altar. Her ankles lowered to his shoulders softly, easily.

"You have a beautiful penis," she said. Cold, clinical, educated word. It was his cock, his jalop, his meat, his licorice stick, it was 735 dirty words of humping, fucking, balling, making it. But it might never again be anything but this that she had called. And now touched. And now guided.

"Slowly, John," she said in caution to the first fire of the open flesh. "And look at us. Look at your strength entering me, penetrating. Is it sweet? Is it warm? Is it beautiful to behold?"

He groaned. Every tissue, bone, and muscle of his strong body had been refined and focused to this one place, this one thing.

"Try not to come, darling. Not yet. I want to suck you into me, centimeter by centimeter of your sweet black flesh. And let us feel each other and see each other so that this will always be a part of us."

And somehow, the flesh walls of the valley of ecstasy began to contract and draw him deeper. Deeper until the golden floss and his black strands were touching and entangled and he was in a place, in such a way, as had never happened before. The bottoms of her thighs were against his chest and she was curled cruelly beneath his weight, the mouth open and inches from his own.

"Oh, I wanted to fuck you," she whispered, relinquishing control and unleashing the rhythmic frenzy into which they then struggled.

Well, that's how he got into an orange couch with

a blue rug and a plastic desk and all the rest of the shit that was probably going to drive him up the wall or out on the window ledge, hanging like a mad monkey over a frayed and frazzled world in which he was at least comfortable. Goddamnit, he thought, why'd he ever brought her up to the office in the first place? Because, his awareness answered truthfully, she was in charge and had been right from the first.

Herzel was angry, disillusioned, and bitter. It so filled his small, old body—bent under the weight of years and the lifelong habit of leaning over the microscope and the laboratory table—that his sleep had been destroyed long before dawn, and he had come awake with a curse on his lips. He apologized immediately to God and arose to read and pray. There was some relief in it, but no solace. He was fully aware now that they regarded him as a fool. A brilliant fool, perhaps, who had stumbled upon a dream. But still a fool.

After he had prayed, Herzel permitted himself the warmth and succor of tea. He moved very quietly on crushed felt slippers through the kitchen of the small white house. His daughter slept only twenty or thirty feet away in the only room of the house that could be called a bedroom. And he did not want to discuss his problems with her. She was a loving girl, a beautiful girl, but there was about her that certain arrogance he had both encountered and sensed in the last several weeks of his dealing with the ministries and officials. Their bright, hard faces and their bright, hard minds would not open to the premise of his proposal. He had

not told them everything. He had told her nothing. And now he sighed with the lonely weight of those decisions and sipped at the tea. In the cold and silent hours of the morning, he thought of his wife. Gone so many years in the final flight from his sorrows, yet still so close that the invocation of her presence was the warmth of a shawl across his bony shoulders. He could have spoken to her of this and she would have understood. There would have been some practical suggestion, for she had been an immensely practical person, or some insightful word or two about the way of things and the people he had encountered in the government offices. "Avrim, you know . . . ," she would remind him deferentially of something he did not know at all until she propounded it. And the way would be clear.

Avrim Herzel sat nodding and bent on the straight-backed chair, wisps of white hair brushed neatly beneath the black yarmulke, and reached a hand into the inner pocket of the plain gray-black suit he wore over a white shirt, its collar open, and brought forth the small folded square of tissue paper. His slender, age-whitened fingers unfolded the paper carefully until the contents of the packet lay bare in the first sharp shock of dawn that assaulted the window on his kitchen. The four stones lay glittering almost obscenely rich in such a simple place, a seven-carat diamond flashing blue fire, a five-carat emerald of green depths from the very bottom of the soul, the round and bloody fury of a ruby of ten or eleven carats, and the second diamond, larger than the first, perhaps nine carats of cold, fierce flame.

"See?" he implored. "Do you see the beauty of this work I have done?"

He spoke, as he spoke to his God or the memory of his wife, as he spoke to them both at least once each day, with the hope but not the expectation of an answer.

Morris Blackburn felt as if his skin had been set afire. Even the backs of his small, pudgy hands blazed. It was like nothing he had felt since his childhood in Europe, when he had somehow become infested with vermin and had undergone a hideous but thorough cleansing at the hands of his father. His small, squirming body had been doused then with kerosene, an icy brutality that quickly turned to flame even though the old man set about almost instantly to scrub away this foulest of antiseptics with laundry soap and hot water. His skin had burned for days then with what seemed to be a hundred embarrassments. As it burned now, and the voice on the telephone continued to drawl on in the merciless nasal condescension of the American rich.

". . . wa-al, Morris, we've been friends for such a long, long time, Eye-yum really, really just incredulous that a thing-a of this mag-a-na-tood could happen, bu-ut . . ."

The "but" was $160,000 worth of black pearl. Morris Blackburn's flaming flesh began to sweat. He wanted to rip off all his fine clothes and flee into the street and the cold November wind pushing soot clouds up Fifth Avenue. Only the rock-hard, gem-hard discipline of his world, the world of the precious stone, held him there, grasping the telephone, his mind racing at incredible speed on three levels—to control his intense discomfort, to think of a solution to this ghastly situation, to find a way of protecting his position.

Morris Blackburn was beautiful, truly beautiful. He was tall and slender, with dark and tightly curled hair that bushed gray at the temples and forelock. Not too gray, but just gray enough for a man who was vigorously fifty, but might have been forty until the lines around the eyes and under the chin deepened in laughter or concentration or fatigue. His suit was beautiful, too. It was designed for him by Marc Bohan of Dior, a chocolate brown gesture of distinguished softness into which a cream stripe had been woven. He wore it with a vest and, under that, a beige shirt of the softest, silkiest cotton, with a massively knotted tie of yet another shade of brown, and red-brown English boots on his smallish, narrow feet.

"Morris is so goddamned beautiful, I feel vulgar paying his bills," the widow of a broadcasting corporation executive announced one night in noting his exquisite presence at a party they both happened to attend. "He looks more like an Eye-talian he-whore than a jeweler."

But he was a jeweler, and his beauty was both his success and his affliction. With Tiffany, Cartier, Van Cleef & Arpels, Harry Winston, David Webb, and a few others dangling their glittering enticement all around them, the very rich were most likely to buy the imagination of the salesmanship with their baubles. And Morris, for example, could sell a small pearl-and-diamond tiara to a young duchess of Grosse Pointe's grease-pit aristocracy while they burrowed into the coverlet (and she giggled self-consciously at the canopy) on his quite authentic Louis XIV bed. But he would also have to agree, several weeks later on the afternoon after they had found an unusual but highly rewarding position

involving the top of his desk, that she did not have to tell her husband just how much it cost, not until he was through with the strain of exercising all those stock options, or whatever they were. Of course, Morris could wait. Financial patience was as much a part of Morris Blackburn's sales approach as the black velvet against which he liked to display both his merchandise and himself in all their naked brilliance.

Waiting, waiting. For the once-royal of a democratized, socialized, aggrandized world to commit their remaining resources to the extravagances they were trained to indulge. For the wives of politicians to see their husbands in power again, profiting again, settling the grocer's, the jeweler's, and all other accounts again. Waiting, as the men who deal in precious stones have always waited, first for the discovery in the earth, the slow cutting and faceting, the setting and selling, and, most finally, the paying. It was very expensive to wait. The waiting was half the price paid for any of it. And for an impatient man like Morris Blackburn, who loved the taste of success, it was the highest price to pay. He had no choice except to cheat.

If the fat sow had not been so incredibly clumsy as to drop one of the earrings on a marble floor. If she had not been so unbelievably blind as to step on it in the hysteria of her search. If she had not been so impossibly stupid as to take it to a Palm Beach dime store jeweler for repairs instead of shipping it back to him immediately. And if the jeweler in Palm Beach had not been so vicious, unconsciously vicious, as to express deep admiration for the quality of "such a realistic piece of fakery."

"My dear Edward," Morris Blackburn said into the telephone, his face suddenly as warm and ingratiating as the voice. "Calm yourself. Our little deceit has made you much too angry. Smile. You must have beautiful weather there . . . and let me explain. You remember how terribly impatient Julia was for the earrings. Of course you do. Well, a small, time-consuming problem developed in the safety lock on the pin of one of the pearls . . . a problem that we have just now solved . . . and let me assure you that it is right here in the vault, if you need such assurance."

"Wa-al, Morris, Eye-yum . . ."

"But Julia couldn't wait, could she? So I simply substituted our design model for the problem earring until such time as . . ."

He talked very quickly, very smoothly. He had been told that he looked like an actor; perhaps he should have been one. There was no black pearl in the vault. But he was racing for the curtain of the first act. Morris Blackburn knew he could play it to the end if he had just a brief intermission.

Max Lishkin felt as relaxed as he ever got as soon as the lousy piece of junk he got from the car rental agency moved out of the business area and onto the open highway to the Miami airport. He reached out with his left hand and rolled down the window, eye on the road, tight one-hand hold on the wheel, letting the soft coolness of the Florida night flush out the ashtray odor he had been closed in with since he left the garage. Lishkin did not smoke, and the ashtray smell was one

of the annoyances he bore whenever he was closed up in a car or even a room where the housekeeping had not been quite to his fastidious standard.

There were many other small conditions of this sort that annoyed this short, round man who wore a plainly cut dark gray suit, a light blue shirt that had been starched into a state of endurance for his travels (he carried no extra clothes with him, occasionally buying a shirt, generally washing out his socks and underwear in the bathroom basin of his hotel room). He never expressed these individual annoyances, but sometimes complained lightly that the only thing wrong with people was their habits. Their bad habits.

For Max Lishkin had no habits, except the habit of having no others. It had been almost thirty years in which he had never done the same thing in the same place for two consecutive days. It led to this sort of dialogue between his closest associations.

"So where's Max?"

"Who knows?"

"Max knows."

"So ask Max."

He was not to be expected anywhere at any given time.

Home? He had two small rooms, one in Brooklyn, the other in his sister's large apartment on West End Avenue in Manhattan. He slept in one or the other on alternate nights, when he did not check into a small hotel or the Sloane House YMCA on far West Thirty-fourth Street or a health club in which he maintained a membership. He traveled to them by subway, bus, cab, foot, and sometimes rented car, which was also the

nonpattern of his travels throughout the country and occasionally abroad. While he would have saved what could have amounted to years of time by flying, Max Lishkin had seen Dallas through the window of a Greyhound bus, the outskirts of Tulsa from the diner of a train, the route from San Francisco to Denver through the windshields of various cars, and a lot of the Atlantic Ocean through a porthole.

Now he was going to fly back to New York, after a reasonably successful three-day trip to Miami, because he had been summoned, through the double and triple relays of answering services and message drops, to an important meeting the following morning. But no one really knew for sure that he was coming, or how.

Thus he was considerably surprised in the airport parking lot when he bent over his belly to pull up on the emergency brake and felt the very cold muzzle of a small-caliber pistol pressed against the side of his head.

Who, he wondered, dying.

Max Lishkin's worn and inexpensive-looking black attaché case caught the next plane for New York. It contained $97,000 worth of loose diamonds, which was a very meager and disappointing haul. But as one of the world's great diamond salesmen, Max had disposed of more than $2 million worth during his three days of making the rounds of jewelers in the Miami area—a sale that was his custom as the resort season began, if not his habit.

Well, fuck it, Shaft thought, pushing out of the new black leather chair. He had his fill of the office. He had

that about three minutes after he had unlocked the door and scooped the accumulated mail off the floor. At some time during the afternoon, he should have called her office and said that he was back, that they could have dinner that night, that they could proceed immediately to bed or the nearest clearing in the traffic, vehicular or pedestrian, and start catching up on his three weeks' absence.

But he was in no mood for that. He felt like the victim of an obscene practical joke. Mr. Cinderella or whatever the hell his name was had showed him some sketches and twittered at him about colors, but Shaft had apparently closed his ears in either the rush to get out of town or maybe some inner resentment at having agreed to let an aspect of his life-style go to some external command.

Shaft got his raincoat from the windowsill where he had thrown it in sulky defiance of the white porcelain wall hooks and fought the wool of his blue blazer past the fabric liner of the coat, with the passing thought that raincoat linings must undergo some special treatment to make them difficult to get into. With both big, meaty hands, he began picking up stacks of mail and stuffing the envelopes into the coat's saddlebag pockets. He wasn't sure where he was going. Maybe some quiet bar down in the Village, except there weren't any quiet bars in the Village, or maybe to his apartment.

Maybe he ought to call the answering service. He started to reach for the telephone. Fuck that, too. Whatever, whoever, it could wait another day. The only family he ever had was the Welfare Department and they hadn't been in communication since the judge had

let him join the army and go to Nam instead of the street hoodlum's postgraduate classes behind bars. And that was a long time ago. Friends? Who did he know in the friendless, detached, and survival-focused New York out there who could pause long enough to wonder if Shaft was back in town?

He got ready to leave, grabbing up the cigarets and matches, and for some reason thinking momentarily about the lifeguard on the beach at Montego Bay. The big, muscular black man, bigger by thirty pounds than Shaft, had said that Americans didn't know how to roll a joint, proceeding to take out a ditty bag of native ganje, roll a big fat one, and blow it right there in the Caribbean sunshine.

"Hello?"

Cowboys and Indians. The disembodied head that peered around the door from the third-floor hallway was wearing a heavy black beard and a big black sombrero. Well, there were funnier looking things swimming around in the dark waters of Times Square. No reason he should be surprised that one of them came into his old building.

"Yeah?"

The cowboy's response was just to look around the office slowly and carefully, then back to Shaft.

"I know how you feel," Shaft said, pushing down the envelopes in his pockets, beginning to button the coat.

"Shaft?"

"Just like on the door."

"We would like a few words with you."

We?

"You want to talk in here or out there in the hallway?"

The cowboy came into the office then.

"Excuse me," he said, turning to look back over his shoulder with a nod of approval.

There were seven of them. All cowboys. Except they weren't cowboys. But they were something. In assorted shapes, sizes, and ages, the seven men who filed into his office were identical in dress—each one wearing a wide-brimmed black hat, long and dark outer coat, dark suits with vests, white shirts, and black, old-fashioned-looking shoes. They all had beards and curls hanging down around, in front of, or over their ears.

Shaft remembered meeting a writer in the No Name Bar across the street from his apartment house one night and the guy's telling him his next book would be *Great Jewish Gunfighters of the Old West*, beginning with Coward Cohen in Cimarron and ending, in a puff of gunsmoke, with Rapid Rabinowitz in Dodge City. The memory made him smile. Nobody smiled back. The men crowding into the office, standing closely together like visitors to an alien, unsafe land, continued to inspect him and his surroundings. He became aware, of course, that they were not cowboys, that he had seen the darkly suited and heavily hatted men and their beards crossing his path briskly, brusquely, always quite vigorously, on a number of occasions.

He had assumed that they were Jewish simply because they appeared to be Jewish, assumed without really thinking it out that their more formal attire sig-

nified some special position or purpose. Rabbis, perhaps. The thought occurred to him now that seven rabbis had come to see him. And it troubled him because Shaft did not believe in God or organized religion, or anything much except himself, and he wasn't sure how to act toward people who did. Especially people who believed so much that they worked at it nine to five.

"You want to find some places to sit down?" he asked. At least the distribution of their somber clothes around the room would cover part of the color scheme. As they found places on the couch and in two black chairs that matched his own, and two, the youngest of them, remained standing against the wall, Shaft speculated that maybe one of their associates had disappeared with the collection plate and they didn't want to cause a scandal by blowing the whistle on him publicly. Well, if God didn't know where this cat was, how could . . . ?

"Thank you," said the leader of the group. "We wish to inquire into your services on our behalf."

"Doing what?"

"An investigation. An inquiry which must be extremely fast yet very discreet, and so, of course, we must first know what you do."

Shaft thought at first that they knew what he did or they wouldn't be there, crowded into his office like a new rock band looking for the bread to get their guitars out of hock. Someplace in one of the file cabinets on the side of the room, he had all the clippings from the *Daily News* and the others about who he was and what he had done.

"Well, maybe you read about one of my cases in the paper . . . ," he began. They looked horrified. "I mean, how did you pick on . . ."

"We read about you in the Yellow Pages," the lead vocalist said. That was a kick in the ass. And it got worse. "You were the closest one."

That was almost as depressing as the discovery that his office had become a setting for a Halloween party, with everything except pumpkins. It gave him the status of, say, the nearest men's room on a cold day. He wished he had left the office five or ten minutes before they had decided to come into it.

"Yeah, well, like it says there in the Yellow Pages, I'm a private investigator. I handle some things that the police don't do, some things the police *can't* do . . ."

That seemed to please them. They all nodded. He wondered why they didn't take off their hats.

". . . and, like in places where there's no proof of a crime having been committed, but some suspicion, maybe I can find out if that suspicion is worth turning over to the police before somebody gets all involved and hurt without it being necessary."

They continued to nod. So he went on and told them about divorce cases (at which they all frowned), how he sometimes had posed as a porter in big stores like Saks Fifth Avenue and Gimbel's to look into pilferage problems (they stopped frowning), and got into a lot of things where nobody would expect a black man to be, which made it easier for him to operate and gather information quietly without raising the barriers of suspicion (which was very pleasing and he thought he felt a breeze raised by the up and down movement of seven wide hat brims).

"And how much does this cost?"

"The rates vary, but mostly I get fifteen dollars an hour now . . . and expenses."

"Expenses?" Big frowns all around.

"Phone calls, taxi fares, maybe I have to buy some information. . . ."

"Why do you have to buy information if you get fifteen dollars an hour to find out yourself?"

Now Shaft frowned.

"Because sometimes it's the only way, the fast way. There's people who have information who don't understand anything, who can't even *hear* anything, except the rustling noise that money makes when you rub a handful of it together right in their ears."

That they understood. There was a generous round of nods. Shaft noticed that a couple of them were inspecting the office very closely, as if they were estimating the cost of such outrageous frippery in a business place. One, on the far end of a couch, picked up a green-gray ashtray from the little table beside him and looked at the bottom of it. Shaft wished he'd steal the goddamned thing, slip it into the folds of the long black coat.

"Okay?" he asked. "Would you gentlemen like to discuss something specific with me?"

"Please excuse us for a moment," the spokesman said, turning around in his chair to face the others, then looking back to ask, "Do you understand Yiddish?"

"What?"

"Yiddish."

"No."

The elder nodded and turned to the others again to begin. Shaft expected it would be a few exchanges

that would decide whether they wanted to tell him what it was all about and then maybe a request that he handle their problem, whatever the hell it might be. What he got, or felt he was getting, was a debate on the beginning and end of mankind with serious review of the causes—and all of it in a language he could not understand.

Each one of the seven men in the room apparently had a speech to make. And each one had a strong counterproposal and counter-counterproposals.

Shaft sat back in his chair and listened for a while. He couldn't understand a word. He thought he caught the name Schwartz being fired back and forth several times and speculated that perhaps a man named Schwartz was their big problem. It was going too fast for him to decipher it as *shvartze*, the Yiddish for Negro, and realize that they were discussing him. He lit a cigaret, turned to look out the window at Times Square. When the cigaret was done, he turned back. They were still at it. He lit another and started to look through the mail he had in his pockets. They argued through twenty-seven advertisements, fourteen bills, two postcards, a note from a cat he knew in the army who was now in the federal penitentiary at Danbury and wanted help, and a notice from his landlord that he was in trouble for repainting without permission. It was such a terrible thing he had permitted to be done that his rent would probably be raised in keeping with the bright, new look of the premises. Landlords thought that way. Shaft looked at his watch. Twenty minutes at least. And still they talked. He thought about dinner, drinks, unpacking his bags, taking a shower, getting

laid, trying a taste of the Jamaican boo he had smuggled back with him. He was tired. Then he thought of throwing them the hell out of there. This was turning into one huge pain in the ass.

"Okay, okay," he interrupted a vigorous declamation from a man about thirty with a bright red beard and what seemed to be the stamina for several hours more of this. They all turned to him, but he spoke to the leader. "I'm splitting, man. I'm tired and I'm dirty and I'm hungry. Why don't you just take Dopey, Sneezy, Sleepy, and Grouchy out of here and go see if you can find Snow White and maybe figure out what the hell you want. I'll be back in the morning. Give me a call. . . ."

"Of course," the leader said. "More talk is unnecessary, but we are a committee and everyone must participate fully. We have decided."

"Decided what?"

"That we wish to retain you to find out what is happening in our business. The diamond business."

"What's wrong with it?"

"No one knows, except something unusual is happening."

"That's nothing to think about."

"Not in your business perhaps. Not in all the others. But in the diamond business, there is never . . ." —and his voice sounded stern and filled with righteousness—". . . there is never, ever the slightest whisper or suspicion of something unusual but that concern, even fear, does not rise in the hearts of a thousand men. Something 'unusual' does not happen more than once in a century. And it is happening now."

Shaft paused over that a moment.

"But how or what do you want me to do, what do you want to know?"

"Everything, from the movement of the smallest speck of dust to the cutting of the largest stone, that is not done today as it was yesterday, as it was the day before that."

"Everything? That's impossible. You need a hundred people like me for that."

"No. Just one . . . with the minds and eyes and ears of the rest of us . . . and you will do the work of a hundred men."

"Hey, man," he started to protest, thinking that he couldn't get *that* tied up for fifteen an hour and tokens, that they were all crazy, anyhow, and would cramp his style.

"Your payment for this will be realistic and honest, since we cannot function any other way. There will be an extremely small percentage of the total gross for all of us . . . we are just a committee representing many more . . . if you are able to provide a solution to our problem."

There was an interruption in Yiddish from the couch.

The leader acknowledged the reminder. "But no expenses," he said.

Shaft's quick resentment reminded him that he didn't like Jews. He was tired, annoyed, and hardly rational about what he resented. The chiseling bastards.

"Yeah, well, you just collect yourselves and get the fuck out of here," he said. "I'm gonna count the ashtrays and go home."

They didn't mind his anger.

"Let me tell you what the figures for the last year were before you decide not to help us."

In two or three scribbles on his memo pad, a door was opened for John Shaft, black private eye, on a world he could not and dared not conceive of ever knowing. His fee, if he did everything he was supposed to do, would come to something just over five hundred and seventy-four fucking thousand dollars.

He went into a state of financial shock that lasted maybe a second before his imagination began spending it.

2

THE FIRST TIME Herzel had been forced to run, he felt a great loss of dignity. He was a robust young man then, and he was struck by shame, some failure, at not having stood before the hooligans and defied their curses, even their blows. But one against twenty in a dark Berlin street, when the evil flower in the bed of hate began to spew its first pollen, was not heroism but a hallucination of honor.

To wash away the smear of blood on his cheek and intellectualize the experience as analogous to that of the shepherd suddenly confronted by the wolf pack was never quite enough. Not that nor the commiseration of men—and there were so many of them—who shared his indignity. Herzel had to call upon the strength of his history for the endurance of survival. What was this, after all, but another, madder Titus come from bloody Rome again after nineteen centuries to sack Jerusalem and destroy the Jew? Diaspora, the great flight, was upon them again. And a man could do no more than flee before pagan hordes reborn. The survivor learns by living while the dead fall ignorant of even their own purposes.

That was one thing the young did not know quite so well as he did.

The best way to run, as he had learned long ago, was to appear to be drawing closer. He had been in contact with the officials of three ministries over the last several weeks and the meetings had ended with their demands. They held expectations that he would respond. They must be keeping some track of his movements, but he was not sure of the extent to which he had come under surveillance. His age and the fact that he had initiated the contacts argued against such extremes. He would, as he must, gamble on that. But not on their expectations.

Herzel informed some functionaries in each of the three agencies that he had made up his mind, that he would like to have a full meeting with all of them in two weeks' time. Would they be so kind as to arrange it? He did not communicate directly with the chief officers of these agencies, assuming that someone of lesser grade would set about the preparations in a more involved and time-consuming manner to make each individual responsibility seem that much heavier and more time-consuming. They could fill the two weeks with little pieces of paper, flying back and forth to each other.

On the following day, Herzel spoke to his assistant.

"When do we rest?"

"Rest?" she echoed. "Never. We are always working."

"Now we rest," he said. "I have reached a decision that will bring many changes to our work, to yours more than mine, changes of greater responsibility. I wish to think and you to prepare."

"I am prepared for anything!" she said proudly.

"Then you should rest with an easy mind. Go into the sunshine for a while."

She embraced him warmly when she left the laboratory, promising to return in two weeks with renewed energy and dedication. He nodded her out and bade her peace and good health. If she were reporting to the government about him, he thought, there would be nothing to report for two weeks, except that he was in a period of meditation. That was no more than, nor any different from, what he had led them to believe.

"I am going to Jerusalem for a few days," he told his daughter that evening.

"It will be difficult for me to get away," she said, frowning, thinking of the stacks of reports on her desk in the Office of Secondary Education.

"Although I am a helpless child, perhaps someone will be kind enough to cut my food for me and hold the glass to my lips."

She was hurt, of course. But there were times when the child must cease attempting to become the parent. This was such a time.

"I see. When will you return?"

"When I am finished."

"And if anyone inquires about you?"

"Suggest that they speak to me when I return."

Avrim Herzel left the next morning for Elath, the Israeli port. He carried no additional clothing other than what he wore. And various areas of his garments contained all the notes he needed, a sizable amount of money in dollars that had been turned over to him without question by an old friend, a jeweler in Tel Aviv.

and all the stones of all his work in the years in the laboratory. He was a walking safety deposit box, but gave no sign of it, a bent and tired-looking old man in a dark suit.

There was another old friend in Elath.

"A *Canadian* passport? Why Canada?"

"All Jews did not flee to Israel."

The friend shrugged. "What city?"

"Quebec. I still have some French."

"But Canadian French?"

"An accent to American ears."

The papers were arranged in three hours, the ship in one.

"It goes to Turkey. It is the first to leave and the shortest voyage."

"I am almost there."

And so he was. He crossed into the United States at Windsor, Ontario, and flew from Detroit to New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport seven days later. He estimated then that he still had almost a week before the search would begin. It was the only error in his calculations. They were on his trail in three.

"What do you know about diamonds?"

"Well, I bought my wife one about seventeen years ago and I think I got through paying for it last week," said Victor Anderozzi, the lean, gray man hunkered over a coffee cup opposite Shaft in the automat on West Fifty-seventh Street. "But it was a big one. You could almost see it with the naked eye."

"Will you stop this shit and give me some help?"

Shaft persisted. "Who put the nickels in the slot for the coffee?"

"I did."

"That's only because I didn't have any change. I'm good for it."

Anderozzi sipped at the coffee without committing himself to that possibility. He liked Shaft, as much as he was willing to commit himself to something like that as well, but he maintained the professional policeman's basic mistrust of anyone who attempted to play his game with another rulebook—or no rulebook at all. He had come to this coffee-cup conference with John Shaft for that reason and one other: as a lieutenant of detectives assigned to midtown Manhattan, part of his job was gathering information, any kind of information, all possible information, and relating it to the events that stumbled broken and twisted across the record book of each day's criminal activity. And Shaft always had some information germane to their mutual involvement. Getting it out of him was something else.

"What's this sudden interest in diamonds? Some broad finally put a ring in that ugly nose of yours?"

Shaft felt vaguely uncomfortable about the question. The face and form of Amy Taylor-Davis floated through the back of his head in an ethereal double exposure. But he was not bothered by the personal nature of the gibe. Anderozzi, whose features had the cruel hook of a linoleum knife, had a nose that Shaft considered the world's record for ugly. Such remarks were merely part of the man's strategy of calling attention to his own shortcomings.

"No, man. No way. Maybe there's some stuff

around I'd lay a sparkle on if I could figure out how to steal one without getting caught. But for real?"

"Are you sure you don't have any change?"

"No. Why?"

"I'd like another cup of coffee. How about you?"

Shaft said yes and watched Anderozzi make the trip back and forth to the coffee spigots, thinking that he wasn't doing too well prying information out of Anderozzi. The conversation had deteriorated into an exchange of smart-ass remarks. And apparently it was going to stay that way until he told Anderozzi something in payment for the information he wanted. Maybe they knew each other too well. But the heavy, light-brown cups were steaming in front of them again, and Shaft thought he had concocted the adequate lie.

"It's just the same old thing, Vic," he said, icing the falsehood with familiarity. "There's been some stuff missing . . . from some shops. Little stuff. Nothin' anybody would get into a sweat about if they weren't worried that it was a beginning. Hell, man steals a little something this week, next he may try for a big something. . . ."

"Uh-huh," Anderozzi grunted. "What else?"

Shaft frowned. "Nothing else." He didn't like the cold look in Anderozzi's dark eyes, any more than half the hoodlums in midtown Manhattan like it when Anderozzi came peering through the murk. "That's all they told me."

"Then you got yourself a problem, Johnny," Anderozzi said. "Because then you got a client who thinks you're as big a horse's ass as you think I am."

It was an embarrassing flick of time in which sound

and feeling stopped in abrupt shock. "I think," Anderozzi went on, guessing at the size of the stakes involved, "that I will have your license lifted for some reason . . . I'll think of one on the way to the telephone . . . and also maybe throw your ass in jail for about forty-eight hours for lying to everybody's best friend, the cop on the corner."

"Up yours," Shaft said angrily. "Goddamnit, I don't control what my clients tell me. They come in and say they got such and such a problem, I got to go out and find out about it. That's all. Why would I lie to you?"

Anderozzi could think of a few reasons; Shaft could think of 570,000.

"Here," Shaft said, pushing his cup toward Anderozzi, "take back your coffee if that's the way you feel."

The insult of his lie and the arrogance of Anderozzi's threat dissolved in a momentary pause between them. Then they laughed. Anderozzi pushed the cup back toward Shaft. He had to give to get.

"You may not have noticed, since you spend so much time at faraway places," Anderozzi said, getting off a slight resentment over the fact that he had never been to Jamaica and only once each to Florida and California to pick up prisoners, "but five very high-class diamond salesmen have been knocked off in the last eight months."

"I saw something. . . ."

"You didn't see much because they got it out of town. Very colorless. A quick one in the head and the merchandise lifted. No big deal, although many, many

thousands of dollars' worth . . . at least in retail value . . . of stones vanished."

"You in on it locally?"

"Yeah. Five is a lot of murder. We're in as much as possible, dealing with five different homicide squads in five separate cities, and the FBI is taking a look, too, since maybe one guy, possibly two, is likely traveling all over the country doing this. But are they traveling from New York? It's not even a New York crime, except this is the point of origin for most of the victims."

"But this is the center of the diamond industry. This is where the howl begins."

Anderozzi was being patient, almost benign. "There's no center of the diamond industry. It's the biggest floating crap game in the world, from Africa to Amsterdam to New York to Hong Kong, taking in South America, the Near, Far, and Middle East. The center of the business is where you got one guy who's got diamonds and another guy who's trying to buy, beg, borrow, or steal them."

The conversation over the emptied coffee cups went on for an hour. It was primary education for Shaft, and he was doing homework, class review, as he strode through the light midmorning people pack between Sixth and Fifth. He glanced into the display window of a fur shop as a stray gust of cold wind reach into the open collar of his coat and reminded him that winter would soon be snapping at his ankles, biting his fingers and toes. He wondered how much time he would be standing around in the snow on this job. And he wondered how much accuracy there was in Anderozzi's parting remark.

"One thing you should know for sure. People in the gem business never, ever tell the truth—about price, size, plans, anything. They're too vulnerable. You probably haven't even got the right address of the people who hired you. . . ."

He stepped off the curb at the I. Miller corner and crossed crowded Fifth Avenue to the squat, white, vaultlike Tiffany building. He went to one of the display windows on Fifth and stopped to examine sprays of gems that were a window decorator's whimsical interpretations of ice on ice. Winter. Shit. It would be the coldest, meanest, slushiest, dirtiest, impossiblest goddamn winter in the whole history of New York—just as they all were. Why didn't he get out, maybe go South. South? Hah. He'p wid yo' bags, Cap'n? Yo' lawn? Yo' garbage? Trying to look behind and under the blazing, blinding prism of the glittering heart of diamonds. There was once this big old dude he had seen around Harlem, had a diamond almost that big set in the right canine tooth. The man's name was Jim. Smilin' Jim. Every time there was a little trouble in the neighborhood, all Jim's relatives would come around to check his head, make sure it was all right. They didn't give a damn about the rest of Smilin' Jim. Just his head. That was so long ago, Shaft thought. It was like looking back into time through the wrong end of a telescope and seeing four generations reduced to one. There were no people around like Smilin' Jim. No black ones, anyhow.

He looked at the red-haired, middle-aged woman in a fur-collared tweed coat that seemed to have been woven of discarded grass.

"Guess we're all changing," he said aloud.

She was startled, then affronted.

"I certainly hope so," she said, hurrying away, with a firm grip on a Bloomingdale's shopping bag full of the world's most hideous whatever. Shaft went the other way. Smiling. He wished he had a diamond in his tooth he could pop in and out like a false nose.

"Is he utterly insane?" Ben Fischer shouted. He did not expect a response to such flamboyant rhetoric. He smashed the flat of his hand down on the top of the gray steel table he used for a desk in the Ministry of Internal Security.

Cara Herzel was near tears. The shattering force of his blow to the drumhead desk top almost pushed her over the brink of control. She jumped and Fischer saw it through the other hand that covered his face in a clutch of exasperation, frustration.

"He's an old man . . . ," she started.

"I'm sorry," Fischer interrupted. "Yes, he is an old man, but he is also one of the smartest old men in Israel . . . except he is not in Israel anymore, is he?"

"He said he was going to . . ."

"I know what he said. He also said he was coming to the offices here for meetings. He also said he was going to take a two-week sabbatical from his work to think. He also said you shouldn't be treating him like a helpless child. Well, I guess he proved his point."

Fischer got up from his desk. He was a man of medium height, squarely constructed of hard work and abundant energy. He wore a short-sleeved khaki shirt, and when he clenched a fist in frustration, as he did now

while pacing the small, neat, and almost barren office, the fingers seemed to coil into a granite sculpture of a fist while muscles and tendons rolled up his forearm like snakes beneath the skin. Cara Herzel thought Fischer probably wished he had that iron grip closing on some portion of her father's frail form.

"All right," Fischer said as he walked. "He went to Elath instead of Jerusalem. He boarded a ship. There is no reason to think otherwise. He is not in Elath and he did not take a plane or train there. . . . The only ship he could have taken sailed for Turkey. Why in the name of sanity did he want to go to Turkey?"

Cara mistook the analysis for a question.

"He didn't know anyone in Turkey. . . ."

Fischer turned from the window to look at her with large brown eyes set deep in crevices of a young but weary face. He saw that she was trembling and became a little more gentle with her, less strident in his own anger at having let this happen.

"An old Jew can find someone he knows *everywhere*," Fischer said, smiling. "And if he doesn't know them firsthand, they both have a cousin in Poland."

Cara smiled, too. Some of her strength returned.

"Then he's in Turkey?"

"No . . . no. . . . He was, as far as we can gather, a Canadian tourist who arrived in London on his way home from a journey to Israel, by way of Turkey. Isn't it ridiculous?"

"Canadian? My father has never even been to Canada."

"I think he has. In the last ten days. And since there is no reason for him to be in Canada . . . or Turkey or

Britain, for that matter, I would suggest that he is in the United States."

"For what reason?"

"The same reason he is *not* in Israel. He could not find what he wanted there and thinks that perhaps he can in the United States . . . in New York, to be specific."

Cara Herzel did not understand. Fischer seemed to be talking to himself.

"Yes, New York . . . he would find friends and a sympathetic ear for his plans."

Then he turned to her again.

"You know about the gems he is carrying, of course."

She did not. Gems? In the time before she had been born, her father had been a mathematician, a physicist, and a fugitive. Since then, as much as he had told her, he had been a widower, an immigrant to the new state of Israel, and a tired old man who was involved in research of some sort at a government-sponsored technical facility—about which she knew nothing and probably could not understand if she had. Gems? There were a thousand and one legends about men—and women—who had traded a lifetime of their work, all their possessions, for a small precious stone that could be carried in some hiding place.

"I'm sorry, but . . ."

"Well, he didn't tell you, perhaps. I can take your word for that. But you must take mine, also. He has in his possession a substantial number of gems. And they jeopardize his life. Perhaps he is too old to be aware of that. I know that and you must know it. And if you have any contact, any communication with him at all, please

let us know where he is. For his own protection."

"I'll . . ."

"That's all right," he said. "Our only concern here is your father's well-being. We share that, you and I. If we hear anything first, I will notify you immediately."

Ben Fischer ushered her out of the office politely but swiftly, without giving Cara Herzel more time for questions—or answers. He knew that he could depend on her completely, and thus set about immediately making arrangements to have her followed from the steps of the building all the way to New York. If not the first plane, she would be on the second or third and so would at least two of his people. He, himself, would follow with two or three others. And together they would find Avrim Herzel and his treasure and bring them home where they belonged.

The doorman at Morris Blackburn's gray marble establishment on Fifth Avenue snapped to attention so briskly it seemed likely that, with practice, he would one day flip over and land on the back of his head. There was no danger. The man had been a bellboy in a Zurich hotel before rising to his current position on the Blackburn mica-mixed concrete that sparkled like gray waves in a phosphorescent sea. His heels cracked, his arms moved spasmodically as one gloved hand shot out to grasp one of the sterling silver door handles on the mauve Rolls-Royce that fell softly against the curb like a big, ripe plum.

For all the doorman's histrionics, Chaline (Cherry) Culp giggled out of the car unaware of him, her eyes

covered with the bright blue glaze of uncomfortable wealth that paints all servitors invisible.

"Morris, goddamn you, darling," she sighed huskily the moment she crossed the threshold and her fingers found the soft gray luxury of his sleeve, "you must help me."

He was grateful to his intuition or whatever put him at the bracelet showcase near the entrance for her arrival. He detested the artificial flamboyance with which she moved, a Roman candle of noises and gestures that destroyed the quiet, soothing, and totally rich ambience of his salon. Now, he walked her quickly around the showcases, the tall, slender woman glued to his arm like a giant snail on the side of an aquarium, heading toward the elevator in the rear and the slow ascent to his office.

They almost made it without too violent a disruption of atmosphere, but she dug her heels into the thick carpeting while they were still in the large showroom, which had a tendency to echo despite the acoustical designs worked around the crystal chandeliers gleaming above them.

"I desperately need something *for-mee-daah-blah* to wear to Scoogie Baskelter's orgy Friday night," Cherry Culp shouted. "She's having a fuck-in for the Panthers or the Philharmonic, I forget which, and I'm barren of excitement. Help me, Morris, help me."

He thought of strangling her where she stood. But too many customers and clerks were now watching. Every head in the place had turned.

"Of course," he smiled, forcing her toward the

elevator with a discreet body check. And in a moment, they were alone.

Cherry Culp was about thirty years old and had been for many years. Most of her day and a small portion of her husband's extremely high income as a promoter of mutual funds were devoted to maintaining her fixed position in relation to the calendar. A great deal of energy and discipline was required as well. She awoke each morning to a breakfast of orange juice and the dry toast of *The New York Times,* a brutal assault on her tendons and muscles in an hour of exercise directed by an Asian diplomat assigned to the United Nations who took his payment on the massage table at the end of each day's session and provided her with the spirit to face Vidal or Kenneth and an hour under the dryer. She dashed to lunch at a highly fashionable restaurant where she devoured lettuce and the reputations of two or three friends who were absent with two or three others who were present, followed by an afternoon nap under the weight of various lotions and potions, an early evening conversation with her astrologer, and then whatever the evening might bring. Scoogie (Mrs. Dandridge C.) Baskelter was not the only hostess in town receiving for the Panthers or the Philharmonic. Day in, day out, that was the schedule. She seldom saw her husband, of course, and he demonstrated his gratitude for that deliverance with continuing, unquestioning financial support and a recognition of the fact that she was utterly worthless as a human apart from her efforts at keeping the economy strong as a continuous circulator of currency.

She began taking off her clothes as soon as Morris

Blackburn locked the door and had almost completed the process by the time he had reached his heavy rosewood desk and leaned against it to look at her.

"Now there I am," she said, "and that's all right. I'll stack it up against anybody. But right now that's all there is. And *you* know and *I* know and the *whole* goddamned *world* knows that Scoogie Baskelter is going to come into the room with a fourteen-carat vermeil daffodil up her ass or a ruby-studded cap on her cooz. Whatever somebody dreams up for the little dimwit bitch. And she's not the only one! Oh, no, Morris, you bet your sweet ass she's not. Vi-Vi Markett is so proud of those incredible udders hanging on her chest that she'll probably turn up with gold thimbles on those absolutely grotesque nipples. Ugh. Did you see what the *Times* said she said, Morris? Jesus, what puke! Well, what are you going to do for me? It has to be devastating. Think, Morris. This is the raw material. Do something."

She made a slow complete turn and then stopped to face him, leaning one perfect hipbone against the leather of the chair that was placed in front of the desk for important customers and consulting colleagues. It was a fine body, Morris thought, evenly and lightly tanned, the skin and muscles toned with the exercise that must be increasingly painful to her, the flesh soft and rich from the constant attention of strong, knowing hands. She had been a perfectionist about maintaining it all, from pedicured toes to the loosely flowing hair that glinted with undertones of auburn as she moved beneath the light. With a depilatory, she had controlled even the pubic triangle so that there was not so much

as a single stray strand of it across the flat of her belly.

And yet . . . and yet . . . what was it? Morris wondered. What did he see there that told him age, decay, and abuse had also visited this temple of her own construction and left it open to almost public visitation.

"I think," he said, "I have had an inspiration."

"Oh, Morris!" she squealed. "Already? Beautiful! What?" Like a child.

He was not quite sure why he was thinking it, but Morris realized that he must create a distraction. He moved toward the woman, his head at an angle of speculation and perusal, and then around her.

"Yes," he mused. "Of course."

"What *is* it, goddamnit?" Cherry Culp demanded.

Morris put his hands on her waist, circling the slender circumference with open thumbs and forefingers. "I think a delicate strand of chains . . . yes, two or three . . . three definitely to sit right here. So. Then coming down here"—he drew the locations on her flesh with a finger—"we will drop loops at alternating levels. One high, as here. The next low, as here."

"Oh, Christ, it sounds beautiful. . . ."

"Wait," Morris cautioned. "This is merely the beginning. From each loop, then, a pendant, falling here and here and here and here."

"Morris!"

He did not move his hand; she did not move her body.

"On the other loops, we would alternate diamonds and emeralds, but here would hang the most perfect . . ."

"Morris . . . Morris . . . ?" she whispered.

The extension that was not to be used except for the most critical of emergencies in the showroom punctuated her sounds with its own peculiar moan. She started at the intrusion.

"What the hell is that?"

"Emergency," he said, leaving her and moving swiftly to his desk.

"Fuck the phone!" she screamed.

It was David Alexander, the tall, slender, blond, and at least trisexual floor manager.

"There's a little old man here who wants to see you. He says his name is Herzel and he was a friend of your father's in Europe."

"You are dismissed," Morris said icily. "This incredible interruption is inexcusable."

"And he has a handful of stones, I'd say diamonds, rubies, and emeralds, that go a total of about forty-five or fifty carats."

Morris turned in silence to look at Cherry Culp, standing next to the chair with her hands on her hips, waiting for the return of the artist to finish his creation.

"Take him into the small showroom and make him comfortable. I will be down in half an hour. Don't let him leave under any circumstances."

Cherry Culp smiled.

"If you can handle this in half an hour, Morris, you *are* a genius."

Simon Solomon strode west on Forty-seventh Street from the IRT subway stop on Broadway wearing the lugubrious mask of an old prophet. He once noted

in a forum on the gravity of faith that none of them, not a single one, had ever been pictured smiling. Was faith not obviously a very serious business? Was not business, then, a very serious faith?

In his middle years, his beard woven of gray dignity, Simon Solomon was not really a joyless man, although the streets of this city were enough to make almost any man sad. The garbage with which they were strewn—human, spiritual, and commercial garbage—was a grave affront to the purpose of man. Pandering shops for pestilent trash, windows filled with photographic filth, liquor stores, abominably unclean restaurants, and dirty, furtive people skulking in doorways or oozing out of the subway cavities as if the earth were emptying its bowels on Mid-Manhattan. The offense against his senses gave strength and purpose to his movements to get away from them. He felt a momentary touch of longing for his own community, the sanctuary of men who were united in their convictions and conventions. This was their strength and this was their transcendence.

"This is bullshit," Shaft said. Simon Solomon stopped dead in his tracks on the curb of Forty-seventh Street and Sixth Avenue.

And Simon Solomon, who was old enough and experienced enough to be surprised by very little, was astonished to find that he had been accosted by the black private detective he and his fellow Hassidim had retained—against the advice of their spiritual leader, the Rebbe Kolvar, but with something approaching mutual agreement about the need for involving an outsider in their problem. The wisdom of the decision was

suddenly a spark burning a hole in the fabric of his confidence.

"Are you making your reports on streetcorners?" he asked.

"Huh-uh," Shaft said. "No reports. Just making up my mind."

"About what?" One of Solomon's arguments for the hiring of Shaft had been based on his serious underestimation of the man. He had believed that an investigator, particularly a black investigator (for it was no telephone book happenstance that Shaft had been chosen), would by his very presence have a positive effect on the honesty of the industry. But he could in no way, as an outsider, ever learn enough to be a threat. The *shvartze* was supposed to be poking around, making dishonest men nervous with his questions and his so obvious presence, not bothering his employers with hostile, unnerving confrontations.

"Yeh," Shaft said casually, "making up my mind about telling you to wrap this whole thing in pink cellophane and stick it up your ass."

Rage swept Simon Solomon.

"How dare you . . . ," he began, his face squeezing the grapes of high blood pressure.

"I dare what I goddamn please, Mr. Solomon. Particularly with somebody who's trying to con me with some shit about a 'small problem' in the business when what he's really holding is five murders and Christ knows what else. I mean, man, you got to have freakier shit going on in your head than three-fourths of the people walking up and down the street here if you think you can lay that on me."

Shaft's anger at being made to play the fool, at being taken for or even suspected of being a fool, pushed out the words, and he was punctuating his insults with a large, round finger that he poked at the older man's lapel.

"Trouble, Mr. Solomon?" The question came from a slightly smaller and much younger man, who also wore the frock coat, dark hat, beard, and paes curls of the Hassidic Jew.

"Fuck off," Shaft said. "We'll be through here in just about half a minute. I still got some . . ."

"Berkowitz, Seventeenth Precinct," the intruder said, reaching for his badge with one hand and making the mistake of grabbing Shaft's arm with the other.

"Oh, shit," Shaft grunted. He tried to say later that he thought the man was a jewel thief in a kinky disguise, giving that as the reason why he stepped down hard on Detective Arnold Berkowitz's instep with all his 192 pounds and brought his fist up sharply to seek the chin that nestled in the soft dark curls of the beard. No one believed him; he did not expect that they would.

Berkowitz went down like a fuzzy, fluttering finish-line flag on the speedsters racing up Sixth Avenue. Simon Solomon, eyes saucer-round with surprise, grabbed up the folds of his dignity and broke into an awkward run down West Forty-sixth Street and the sanctuary of his office.

Shaft just stood there above the inert policeman, considering the merits of the low left hook. But he was disappointed in his timing. He used to be faster than that, didn't he? Where had the speed gone? He had to stop screwing around and get to the gym. At that point, they all fell on him.

3

BEN FISCHER CAME into the country packing almost enough hardware for a shoot-out at the Suez corral. He traveled on diplomatic papers, and nobody at the JFK international arrivals building poked into the miscellany of heavy, sturdy luggage that came with him and his two companions. They were young men, younger than Fischer by four or five years and two or three wars. But like Fischer, they had been in New York. They knew which way the streets ran, the general definition of the place. It would probably not be too important. They were, after all, pursuing a slow-moving old man and an unthinking young woman who would show them the path. There should be no major problems. But just in case.

The Bren gun, the Sten gun and all the other guns of that sort are very simple. One piece about eight or ten inches long is the firing chamber and the container of the only moving parts other than the .45-caliber slugs. Here, looking like a crude metal pencil box when dismantled, are the trigger, bolt, ejector, spring, and spring pin. The barrel screws into one end, a ten-inch tube of steel that has no raised sight at the muzzle end

and is as innocent as the cold-water outlet of household plumbing until it is turned on. To these components comes a third, a long, slim cartridge clip containing fifteen, twenty, or twenty-five shells. It plugs into the bottom of the metal case as simply as the barrel screws in at the front. Very simple, very crude. But put them all together and they spelled machine gun—easily carried in one hand on a commando raid or under a loose coat while strolling through a city. How simple are a mechanic's best tools, thought Ben Fischer, who had brought along five of them. They were in the bags the porter was wheeling out to the cabstand, pushing through the lightly clad, straw-hatted, and tanned bodies of the lambs who had come home from the Caribbean for the sacrifice to New York's winter.

"Good flight?" asked Marc Bellikoff, the senior member of the pair who had flown to New York the day before—two seats behind and across the aisle from Cara Herzel.

"Routine. Where is she?"

"With the family of a girl she met on a kibbutz. West End Avenue and Eighty-ninth Street."

"Enoch?"

"He's there, too. In the street. Bitching about the cold."

Marc smiled wryly. It was a fundamental rule of life: the senior man on the mission had warm toes and a dry nose.

"Where are we? Careful with those bags, please." The command was short, sharp in the voice of a man who expected to be obeyed. The porter ignored him and put an ugly scrape on one of the bags, jamming it

against the lock of the cab trunk. Fischer retaliated with the smallest imaginable tip, and the porter pushed off with a quite clear grumble about the cheap motherfuckers who thought they were big shots from riding in air-ee-o-planes.

"The Taft," Bellikoff said. "It's midtown and central and a lot of foreigners stay there. We won't be quite so obvious."

"All right, get back to West End Avenue. I don't want her to go to the corner newsstand unless we know about it."

Marc found some amusement in this. "No problems," he said. "Everybody in New York is so worried about burglaries, they lock up the buildings like prisons. She's lucky she got in the front door, and there's certainly no way for her to get out."

"Be sure of that. Call me in two hours."

Ben Fischer and his commandos got into the cab seeming to pull the flapping material of the loose trenchcoats in behind them. As invasions go, it was a fairly quiet beachhead.

"You lemme out of this goddamned cell!" Shaft shouted. "You hear? Lemme out!"

He spun away from the bars of the small, precinct-house cell with the fury of a wolf in a hen house. There was nowhere to go. He faced only the echoes of his futile demands as they bounced around the concrete that encased the steel cages. It looked like they were going to bust him good, once and for all. And he thought that he should certainly put himself in touch

with the protective covering of an attorney before they started busting.

He reached into his pocket and got a cigaret, lit it, and threw the match on the floor. Then he bent over and picked up the match and threw it in the small, open toilet that grew out of the cell wall like a horizontal mushroom.

"There's a butt under the bunk near the wall," Anderozzi said. Shaft whirled around toward the door and then ran to the bars. Anderozzi was smiling happily.

"Vic, unlock the goddamn door. Quick!"

"With my teeth?" He kicked at the gate with a rubber-clad shoe. "They don't give everybody can openers. Besides, you look natural there. Maybe you found a home."

Shaft lunged at him through the bars, but Anderozzi ducked back with the alacrity of a man who is accustomed to the sudden lunge.

"You sonofabitch!" Shaft shouted. "Wait'll I get out of here and get a lawyer. I'll sue the goddamned police department and the city for every penny they got."

"It won't come out of my pay," Anderozzi shrugged. "I should give a shit who you sue. And who says you're going to get out, anyhow?"

"Fuck you, then," Shaft said, turning away. "I ain't playing any more games."

He was staring at the wall, waiting for Anderozzi to leave, when the detective lieutenant turned the key in the lock and said, "All right, come on. But mind your manners until we get out of this joint. The Holdup

Squad is pissed enough at you right now to turn that nonsense into something serious."

A few minutes later, they were walking out under the bleak and baleful glares of resentful policemen and onto the street, immediately wrapped in the monoxide vapors that the city touches behind her cauliflower ears of grate and grind. Shaft was still playing the outraged innocent. He sounded about as sincere as a cab driver giving thanks for a bent dime.

"What I do? What I do?" he persisted. "I'm talking to this client of mine and this guy runs up in a beard and cowboy hat and starts grabbing at me. For all I know, the real shit's coming down, man."

Anderozzi waited out the soliloquy, patiently. It finally began to sound so silly to Shaft that he couldn't help laughing.

"That was one surprised little motherfucker," he gloated. "His eyeballs went rolling around like they was trying to find two new holes in his head to look out."

"That's one angry cop you better look out for from now on," Anderozzi corrected him.

"What's he gonna do?" Shaft snorted. "Shit, man. I got a job to do, that's all. He don't get in my way, I don't get in his. Simple as that. Right?"

They stopped at the corner of Lexington Avenue. The movement toward Grand Central was already turning the traffic into the slow, ooze-gray Dairy Queen being expectorated by a giant custard cooler.

"Wrong," Anderozzi corrected him again.

Anderozzi tried to read Shaft, in the practiced way he read the documents of guilt and venality that were written across the faces of most of his customers. But

there was nothing in Shaft's face or stance to tell him anything, not even the customary wariness. The blank, black mask had fallen. All Anderozzi was getting was the caricature of a black man. And it made him angry.

"Look, John," Anderozzi said, balling up a hard hand and leveling a finger at Shaft's broad chest. "You're big, you're tough, and you're smart. We all know that. But you're begging for it and have been for a long time. One day, maybe pretty soon, somebody's going to fill your order. And I don't care how big and tough you are, the first one you stop is probably going to be the last one. It happens to cab drivers and presidents. There's no reason it can't happen to you."

Shaft, first annoyed, then amused by the lecture, remained unsmiling.

"Oh, yes there is," he said.

"Yeah? What?"

"I went up to Hundred Fifty-fifth Street the other day and got me this bottle of real weird shit from Mother Underwood. I just rub it all over an' . . ."

Anderozzi's back receded quickly down the street. Shaft smiled. But he also thought that he better get his ass in gear and get the job over with before he got in big trouble. It didn't occur to him that he was already there. . . .

Morris Blackburn *was* a genius. He knew it. So did Chaline Culp when he left her in the private blue marble bathroom of his office to repair the damage to her costume and cosmetics and returned to his first love, greed. Every strand of his own graying sweep of hair

was back in place and he was touching only with habit, not need, at the bulbous knot of the light gray tie when he stepped into the small private showroom off the main display chamber.

"Good afternoon," he said warmly to the thought that the little old man was carrying a branch of Tiffany's in the folds of his simple black coat. These old Jews. They were incredible. They came out of nowhere, looking like nothing. "I am Morris Blackburn. Can I help you?"

Avrim Herzel looked up from the wasteful luxury of the heavy blue carpeting without comment, his fine, dark eyes following the jeweler's smiling face as Blackburn moved around the small table in the room and took a chair in front of the window. Herzel saw some remnants in the leonine features that were still in his old man's shadowy memory of another time and place. But not many. Blackburn looked like a whore and smelled like one, the old man thought, the sharp, sweet scent of fresh cologne offending the membranes of his nostrils.

"Moishe?" he asked. "The son of Wolf . . . ?"

"I am Morris Blackburn," he interrupted emphatically, the words coming sharply from a small fissure in a face that had turned to pink granite.

Avrim Herzel shrugged almost imperceptibly. What did names mean anymore in the confusion of peoples and places?

"I knew your father in Berlin," he began again. "I knew you, too—many, many years ago, when you were too small to care about or remember an old friend of the family. But there was a time . . ."

The words seemed to drift off and falter. What the hell did the old man want? Blackburn wondered. And what did he have in his pockets? If the old man had known his family, that was so long ago, and who could remember? Who *wanted* to remember?

"I grew up in England," Blackburn said, his tone a good deal softer. "It is very difficult for me to . . . well, even to remember the faces of my parents. I had an old photograph, but somehow it was lost."

Herzel nodded. "I feel very sorry for you, then."

"There's no need . . . ," Morris Blackburn said quickly. Why the hell couldn't they have a nice clean conversation about whatever was on the old man's mind without all this? "Please, what can I do for you?"

The old man reached into one of the pockets of his overcoat and the thin white hand emerged with a tissue paper packet that he unfolded carefully. Leaning over slowly, he spilled the contents of the packet on the black, brushed chamois top of the small table, a handful of fire on a swatch of darkness.

Blackburn was impressed. But he was also a dealer.

"Mmm," he grunted, looking but not yet touching. "I don't deal in this sort of thing . . . in loose stone . . . but if you want to sell them, I . . ."

"I want to give them away," the old fool said. "I want you to help me, because you are the son of an old friend and the only one I know who can. Help me give them away."

Morris Blackburn very nearly had his second orgasm of the day. And it was still early.

It was the same group. Maybe. Shaft couldn't tell. They looked familiar. But that cop on the corner of Sixth Avenue had looked familiar, too.

"Gonna give you cats some badges like they wear at conventions," he said. They expressed puzzlement. They were puzzled anyhow about why he had insisted that the group gather at his office again.

"Do you wish to report?" Simon Solomon asked.

No, Shaft said, he didn't want to report. He didn't have anything to report except the fact that he'd punched out a cop and had gone to jail. They knew that. They also knew a lot more.

"No, I went over there to the diamond district to see if I could find me something to report. But all I know now is that maybe a third of you people over there is selling diamonds, another third is buying, and another third . . . maybe pushing trucks, driving by in empty cabs, looking like Puerto Rican delivery boys carrying coffee or washing windows with a brush and a bucket . . . is really standing around just watching, because that other third is all cops."

They didn't seem surprised at that. Not at all.

"Now if you're buying," he pointed a finger at the one with the red beard, "and you're selling," indicating a short, round man who seemed to be a little cross-eyed, "and you're watching," moving the finger on to the tall, thin Hassid who was sitting next to Solomon, "then between the three of you, you got to know everything that's going on. Right?"

There was no indication of either disagreement or assent. They were waiting for the punch line.

"So what the hell do you need with me? I can't do

anything for you that you're not already doing. Shit, I can't even get into the clubhouse."

They all looked to Solomon as the natural spokesman. He nodded.

"So I'm buying," he said. "And he's selling," indicating one of the others, "and he's watching."

Shaft nodded happily. They were getting the message and he was getting rid of them so he could go back to his nice quiet collection of divorce cases and insurance adjustments.

"So now tell us," Solomon finished. "Which one of the three of us is also killing and stealing?"

Cara Herzel lost them at the ladies' room of the West Eighty-sixth Street subway station, downtown side. They did not know they were being lost until Patrolman Daniel Hennessey and Patrolman Rafael Nunez of the Transit Authority force approached them from different directions of the platform, each with a small walkie-talkie radio attached to his belt, emitting static and scratchy, squeezed voices.

"What are you guys waiting for?" Hennessey asked, pressing closer to them than an old friend, ready to deal with the sudden grab or dash.

"Nothing . . . nothing," Marc Bellikoff said.

"Waiting for a train," Enoch Belzer made the mistake of lying.

"Three gone by since you been standing here," said Patrolman Nunez, from behind them, where his approach was so intimate as to suggest sodomy.

"You hang around ladies' rooms a lot?" Hennessey speculated.

"Wait a minute," Bellikoff blustered.

"Sure," Nunez said. "We been waiting ten minutes for you to go someplace. Only what you been doing is watching the toilet. What are you watching the toilet for?"

"Listen," Bellikoff said.

"You can't see nothing out here," Hennessey said. "Maybe you was going to go in there. Right? You were going into the ladies' toilet."

"No, we weren't going into the rest room." Bellikoff was angry at the stupidity of the incident and the bullying, pressing manner of the policemen. "Just what do you think we are?"

"Don't know," said Nunez.

"Tell us," said Hennessey.

Bellikoff started to speak, then went silent. Enoch took his cue from the silence and said nothing.

"That's right," Hennessey said. "It's too public here for conversation. You just come along over to the office with us and we'll have a little chat."

"Are you arresting us?" Bellikoff asked. He could feel the hands of the officer behind them shaking them down swiftly, expertly. They carried no weapons.

"No, we're just talking with you. Only let's not talk here." Hennessey waved them toward the platform exit with his truncheon.

"Move," Nunez said.

Cara Herzel's relief was as violent as the extraction of a troublesome tooth. A great pressure moved away from her as she watched through the slightest possible crack in the lavatory door. The two men had been there —a trace or shadow of them, in her every glance behind, in every reflection, in every tentative peek—for

more than five thousand miles. And now they were going away. And now she would be alone. Even the foul, filthy public toilet was a brighter place for their departure. She whispered her gratitude, some of it for the fat, friendly black woman who had been in the tile and concrete chamber when Cara entered and shared her outrage over the male loiterers.

Cara shivered slightly, a tall and slender girl who turned now to a splinter of shattered mirror on the wall to touch at her dark brown hair. The mirror was too filthy for a clear view of the dark circles under her eyes. There was a lipstick graffito on the wall explaining that the High School of the Performing Arts sucks, or did at the time the caked and smeared announcement was inscribed. Reading it reminded Cara that her English was only fair and heavily accented, that she was about to set out in a city of eight or ten million people to find one little old man and . . . somewhere out there, beyond the scabrous safety of the toilet, Ben Fischer and some others were undoubtedly looking for her. She smiled at herself, a broken smile across the shattered shards of the mirror, to give herself a small portion of self-confidence, and thought that she had not been quite so stupid as Fischer had believed.

Where would her father go, she wondered, as she pushed tentatively at the door and then stepped out to the platform, empty now of trackers and hunters but busy with the usual traffic. There was comfort in these people who seemed alien and different to her. She was proud that she had not become paranoid about being followed and confident that her way was clear now. But where did she look? An old friend? He had corre-

sponded with the experts of his technology from Tokyo to Transylvania; they were always writing back and forth, these men who probed and pricked at the time locks of scientific secrets. Cara Herzel went up the subway steps to the street, passing a Spaniard making impersonally obscene sucking noises with his tongue against the roof of his mouth in appreciation of her long, lean, and darkly tanned legs.

Would he be with his scientific associates at a university? What was the school here? Columbus? No, that was a place. Columbia? Columbia. She stood at the bleak, gray corner of West Eighty-sixth and Broadway; the cars moved down Broadway, passed Cara Herzel like bunches of bruised and dented dates as she tried to perceive the method used in New York for attracting the attention of a taxi. She glanced around at the quick-moving strangers on the other corners of the broad and divided street. They were all busily engaged in whatever it is that preoccupies New Yorkers and sends them plunging into the grimy darkness in pursuit of their lives. And then a yellow cab, its plastic standard glowing atop the roof, fell from the bunch in which it moved and came slowly but certainly toward her. She looked up and nodded gratefully at the driver, still uncertain of her destination in search of her father. She started to open the front door of the cab, but the driver, a round and rough-looking middle-aged person who surrounded the remains of a dying cigar in his mouth, lifted a thumb toward the rear. She got in.

"Where to, lady?" he asked the rear-view mirror.

The name on his identification card was lost in a

finger smudge that had been imprinted there since the life of this cab began.

"Are you Jewish?" Cara asked tentatively.

The figure at the wheel half-turned to face her through the plastic shield that separated the front and back seats of the cab. The history of immigration in New York was written on the face that peered at her through the small opening of the smudged, smeared panel. So was the suspicion of the city's streets. What the hell was this? For a seventy-cent ride and a quarter tip, you had to answer questions?

"I ain't actually Puerto Rican," Norman Greenfeld said. Cara was a pretty girl. His attitude softened before she went on.

"I want to find my father. Where would an old man go in this city if he had no friends here, no family?"

An old man alone in a city like this.

"He would go to *shul*," Norman said.

Cara nodded. She felt the first moment of relief from the anxiety that had been part of her conscious hours since the disappearance of her father. Of course. Of all places he might go, might turn, one of them would be to his god.

The cab pulled away from the curb swiftly. Norman Greenfeld was going to take a young visitor to this alien city on a guided tour of its venerable places of worship in search of an antiquity, her father.

"I think you should join the tennis club," she said.

"What?" He had been walking up and down the living room of the small apartment, occasionally going

into the bedroom to look out the fire escape window onto dark and dreary Hudson Street where it was lighted by the orange globes encircling the exterior of the No Name Bar. Or going into the kitchen to open the refrigerator door and stare blankly at the almost empty racks, then back into the living room to pace. The fidgets. He was waiting. And Shaft did not like waiting. He did not particularly like anything at the moment, including the tall, slender girl who sat in the one club chair against the gray-white walls of his small and somewhat barren apartment, flipping through the pages of *Town and Country* magazine. Waiting was ridiculous. He was ridiculous. The magazine and the girl were ridiculous.

"What?" he repeated. There was so much contained anger or irritation in the question that it might have intimidated anyone else, but not Amy Taylor-Davis, who either ignored the moods that accompanied his tension or accepted them, but was certainly not terrified by them.

"You could work off your nervous tension and it would be wonderful exercise," she said.

Work off his tension, for Christ's sake. He could do that by going over to the McBurney Y on Twenty-third Street and running himself into exhaustion or flinging himself into the No Name and smashing his mind with as much Johnnie Walker Black Label as they could pour and he could drink. Or look for a dark street anywhere and hope that someone, something would come at him. Or by making that motherfucking telephone ring with the call, the series of calls, that would give him the information he had demanded to get moving on behalf

of the diamond dealers. But playing tennis? Jesus Christ! He had a quick vision of himself in white shorts and ribbed striped socks, and sneakers, a short-sleeved shirt open at the neck as he danced across the courts at some imaginary country club, waiting for the service of the fuzzy white ball. The vision embarrassed him. He looked like a ballet dancer, and so did all the other silly fucking faggots who danced around on tennis courts.

His dinner date with her had been standing for two or three days, since the last time they had been together. Shaft wished he had canceled or somehow avoided it. Tennis, my ass. With cuffs on his shorts. With a white V-neck sweater edged in maroon and blue. With dark glasses so big he looked like a six-foot Mickey Mouse. Tennis. Bullshit. Why didn't the goddamn telephone ring? He had come away from the meeting with Solomon and the others thinking that they just might be able to do it. Shaft had told them what he wanted to know, what he had to know. They did not seem overly challenged by the requests, merely a little surprised that they had not thought of asking themselves without his prodding.

"I don't play tennis," he said.

"You could learn. You're in good condition."

"Yeah? Who'd I play with?"

She was ignoring the hostility in the blunt, sharp questions. "Everybody's playing tennis, darling."

"Yeah? Well, fuck 'em . . . and anybody else who . . ."

The phone rang, either ridiculous punctuation or proper interruption. About to deliver his best thoughts on the basic foolishness of tennis players, their rela-

tives, their friends, their business associates, their personal cleanliness, and their sexual habits, Shaft stopped and grabbed the phone. He held it against his ear with more pressure than it required. And she smiled at him from the chair. Why did she enjoy goading him, pushing him off the center of balance? Why didn't she just get insulted and go home?

"Morris Blackburn," Simon Solomon said to Shaft. And hung up. Shaft put the receiver down. Yeah. Well, that smooth sonofabitch. He looked at the floor a moment and thought. When he looked back up to say something, she was standing. But not to go home.

"Listen," he said, "I got some work to do."

"It begins right here," she said.

And she walked away from him toward the bedroom of the small apartment. He followed. Thinking: just one more time. Just one more time.

4

MORRIS BLACKBURN QUICKLY reorganized his personal and professional lives to meet the unusual requirements of his new associate. Cherry Culp was out. Avrim Herzel was in. It was the least Morris could do for a man who was going to show him the path to the most incredible source of wealth and power that man had ever imagined. What a magnificent new friend had come to Morris in the form of this frail and diminutive old man whose mind had been able to perceive that mystery of kings, that desire of fools.

The scientist has been attempting to duplicate, recreate, or imitate the precious stone that is mined from the earth since the 1700s. It began with the first scientific knowledge of the crystal structure of gems; men are never content to leave nature's work to nature. It had been a preposterous pretension, of course. There were all forms and varieties of would-be imitations that had come forth as a result. And to the naked eye, and sometimes under the loupe of the expert, they seemed very close. But not quite. They were very hard. But never hard enough. They had depth and fire. But not depth

enough or fire enough. With heat, with light, with fire, with pressures almost measuring the equal of the earth's own embrace. All these they tried over the years to reproduce the precious gem. And with all these techniques, some so bizarre as to represent necromancy, they almost succeeded. But not quite.

The ultimate test, the final and most accurate test, involved a handful of sand and the microscopic blades of its grit. To take a synthetic gem, the pretender to the crowns and diadems, in this handful of sand, to grind it, grit it, and scrape it, that was the test. Then to look again. On one facet or another, the loupe would find an abrasion, a small wound. But the real stone, which had resisted all the earth's grinding in its birth, would emerge pristine and perfect. Until Avrim Herzel. The Herzel stones had the strength and beauty of reality, of his genius.

It would be truly unfortunate to eliminate such a man from society. But, of course, there was no other choice. As the small, secure room in the basement of his shop became a laboratory of laser technology, Morris Blackburn gave up his social life in the interests of science. He sent his valet off on an unexpected vacation and gave over that corner of his apartment to Avrim Herzel as a temporary lodging.

There, Herzel could rest. In the basement laboratory Blackburn was quick to furnish, the old man could work. And somewhere in the city, between those two private places, the old man could die. Soon. Soon enough.

Shaft was freezing his ass off—as well as several other extremities—as he loped as briskly as possible up Fifth Avenue in the Fifties. The wind cut through the porous weave of the cheap khaki slacks and the sleazy imitation wool of the dark windbreaker. His feet were cold in the battered old shoes he had found among the dust balls at the very rear of his closet. White cotton socks showed above the shoes and below the cuffs of the green cotton pants. At least they hid the sting of cold pain he felt against his ankles with each gust of the wind. That was the real trouble with being poor; it was too goddamn uncomfortable. In the winter, you froze from one fucking end to the other, with nothing you could afford protecting you from the cat's claws of the cold when they slashed at you through light and sleazy fabrics. In the summer, you sweated until your brain threatened to explode against the pressure of the inescapable heat. There was no air conditioning for the poor unless you went shoplifting in Woolworth's.

Shaft's muscled, wide body shuddered in a spasm of unwilling response to the meanness of the gray November day. Shit!

He looked like a porter, the man who sweeps and scrubs, who empties the wastebaskets and mops the lavatories and runs the vacuum cleaner as unobtrusively as possible over the carpeting, waxes the tiles and the desks, and does all the unseen and unthought-of anonymous drudgery that is part of every business operation's day and night. That was the work of the spic and the spade. All spic and span by spic and spade, work that the average housewife should understand as she plays nigger to the world on aching knees. Shaft

hoped he appeared to be ready for it. Because that's what he was. And it cost him a thousand dollars to get the job.

"Man, you out of your fuckin' mind," Elvon Drew told Shaft. "I ain't gonna let you come down with no shit on that job. I got a reputation. Shit, I even got a pension when I get tired of doing at that job."

Elvon Drew was fifty-three years old and a man of little imagination. But he knew enough of the ways of the world to realize that if Shaft wanted to be a substitute as the porter at Morris Blackburn's establishment, there was more to it than Shaft's sudden interest in making sure the toilet paper supply in the rest rooms was equal to the demands of the day. Enough to it, in fact, to somehow make it pay, to be to Elvon's benefit to call in and say he was ill, that his cousin John Shaft would come down and do the job for a few days.

John Shaft and Elvon Drew lied a lot to each other and talked a lot of trash in the negotiation over Elvon's brief replacement at the end of a broom in Morris Blackburn's establishment. And Elvon was an excellent strategist.

"What you want to steal?" he asked Shaft over a bottle of Seagram's in his small apartment on 105th Street, in the tired, dying file of bruised buildings between Amsterdam and Columbus.

"Steal?" Shaft overreacted. "What the hell do you mean, steal?"

Elvon looked at Shaft's blue blazer and dark gray slacks and let his eyes answer. As rumpled as he

was, as unpolished as the russet-brown loafers may have been, Shaft was too goddamn clean to be honest. Elvon's eyes said Shaft was a hustler, a pimp.

"Listen, goddamnit," he said, "I ain't gonna steal *anything.* Not so much as a motherfucking paper clip. This here is . . . a business thing. Some business cats just want to know how the business is doing."

"Shit. Cleanin' floors? What kind of stuff you trying to lay on me, man?"

He paused.

"How much?" Shaft asked with a glum awareness that he was being had—by an expert. Elvon smiled at him almost paternally.

Now David Alexander was smiling at him in the manager's small working office at the rear of Blackburn's elegant establishment, a smile that was just as corrupt as Elvon's but somewhat more sophisticated. The manager's bright blue eyes shone with the hunger of a glutton passing a pastry shop window. Oh, goddamn, Shaft thought, he'd be cleaning the floors around there with one hand on the broom and the other on his fly.

"You're Elvon's cousin?" Alexander asked. "You certainly don't look alike."

"Everybody in my family looks different," Shaft said, trying to remember not to be a smart-ass with this clown. "Elvon and me is maybe the differentest looking of the whole bunch, except for a pinhead nephew o' Elvon's that don't look like nobody, nowhere."

"I see."

Yeah, you see, you simple sonofabitch. You probably see what color underwear I got on.

"Well, it's all right with me if you want to be a porter. It's a very responsible job—particularly in an establishment of this sort where we serve possibly the finest client list of any in New York. We must be spotless, absolutely spotless. And that will be your job . . . but . . ."

David Alexander was almost winsome.

"I should think you would look for better things. You might even be a model with the right wardrobe."

Shaft frowned.

"Me? Ain't no way for somebody like me to get into that. Takes education. I got thowed out of school right into the army. This here is what I do—this is what I knows how to do."

"Yes, well . . . perhaps we can talk about it another time. After work, possibly. We could have a drink. Some of my friends are models and they might be able to give you some hints about ways you could approach it. Hmmm?"

"Hey, yeah, that'd be just fine. You want my Social Security number?"

"What? Oh, of course."

And Shaft went to work as the porter, chief ashtray and wastebasket emptier, mopper-upper, and possible new slice of dark meat at Morris Blackburn's jewelry store on upper Fifth Avenue. It was a surprise. He, too, thought of most porters as mindless, shiftless robots. But he, Shaft, had to work his ass off.

Ben Fischer was going up the wall of his room at the Taft Hotel. They had not been able to get so much as a hint of the trail taken by Cara Herzel to her father. They had contacted some of the more militant Zionist organizations in the city for help and got little more than puzzled stares, followed quickly by promises of devotion to the cause—whatever the cause might be. They had tried a number of families that were prominent in their support of the Israeli state, hoping that Avrim or Cara would have brushed against at least one of them. They had even gone looking in Jewish places of every activity from prayer to pleasure and had found nothing.

"Where the hell are they?" he stormed. His words sounded futile in the neat, small room. The furnishings mocked him. It was a room for a salesman. A room for a tourist. He felt hemmed in by the witless, mass-production look of it.

"Where?" He stood by the window and gazed sullenly down on Seventh Avenue. Crowds moved through the dark canyon of the buildings like a dirty gray river. Two million Jews in New York . . . two million and two. It was hopeless.

A vein pulsed on the side of his right temple, a thin blue rope, throbbing, measuring his anger like a metronome.

"Where?" he muttered against the windowpane.

It was the waiting . . . the endless waiting for something to turn up that was always the hardest part of any operation. He was not a patient man. Even when circumstances forced him to act like one. He had spent his life waiting . . . waiting in the catacomb cellars of Jerusa-

lem apartment houses while the Tommies searched the rooms above, their hobnailed boots clattering up the stairwells. And after his Stern Gang days, the waiting in Montevideo . . . Buenos Aires . . . Caracas for a man to show his face, a man who had left his past in the horrors of Ravensbruck or Dachau—left his past, but not his guilt.

Waiting . . . always waiting. He turned away from the window and moved to the opposite wall in a few short, angry strides—a man from the Negev, a man who was used to walking with a gun at his hip. He glanced at his watch. It was now ten minutes before three o'clock and not a word from Bellikoff or Belzer. He cursed soundlessly in Hebrew and resumed his restless tour of the room. There was nothing else to be done.

Detective Aaron Feldman prided himself on his astuteness. He was a spotter. He had an eye—and a nose. He could smell out a wrongdoer the way a trained dog could sniff out a bag of pot in a cosmetics case through three clouds of Arpege. He could look at a man strolling down a street with a shopping bag in his hand and a little bell would ring in some secret corner of his brain. He would stop the man, just like that. Stop him, flash the badge, and the man's face would turn the color of wet flour as he either handed over a bag of fresh burglary or tried to raise a small riot to cover his departure. It was a talent, a gift. Now, Feldman sat behind his desk in the ugly, crowded confines of the Eighty-eighth Street precinct house and looked at the two men turned over to him by the Transit Authority police. He was

stalling for a little time, working things over in his mind, trying to fit them into the patterns of criminal debris swept off New York's streets. They didn't look like toilet peepers, but what does a toilet peeper look like? The men had given him names—Marc Bellikoff and Enoch Belzer—but they could not substantiate even that meager information. Neither carried identification. Nothing, not even a watch with initials engraved on the case. The little bell in Aaron Feldman's brain was clanging raucously. Something stank.

"This is an outrage," Bellikoff announced in clipped Oxonian tones. He was acting like a man on the verge of complaining to the manager. Feldman fixed him with eyes that were not too much colder nor harder than his suspicions. The man irritated him. He was too arrogant, too sure of himself. A man picked up loitering at a ladies' room should show some twinge of shame.

"An outrage," Bellikoff repeated.

Everybody he talked to on any given day—starting with his wife—was outraged.

Feldman grunted. He turned his metallic gaze on the man who called himself Enoch Belzer. Sephardic, Feldman decided. Younger than his friend and more sensitive. He spotted the vaguest tremble of a lower lip.

"You enjoy watching women pee?" Guilt was a powerful weapon: embarrassment cut just as deeply.

Belzer's lip twitched noticeably. "We were waiting for a train."

"To go where?"

"The Bronx."

"Where in the Bronx?"

"This is ridiculous," Bellikoff cut in. "Utterly ridiculous."

"Just let him answer," Feldman snapped. "He's old enough to know where he was going."

Enoch Belzer was starting to sweat. He crossed one leg over the other and studied the tip of his right shoe. His shoes were custom-made out of dark cordovan leather. They were, Feldman noticed, the kind of shoes that men paid seventy-five dollars a pair for at Brooks Brothers or some fancy men's boutique like Meledandri's or Battaglia's. Enoch Belzer had bought them in Montevideo for ten dollars and he wished that he were there right now.

"Where in the Bronx?" Feldman persisted.

"The baseball field. The world-famous New York Mets." He forced a tourist's ingratiating smile. Bellikoff groaned audibly and Feldman leaned back in his chair grinning like a wolf.

"You guys are marvelous. The *world famous* New York Mets . . . in November . . . in the *Bronx,* for Christ's sake. . . ."

"I want to make a telephone call," Bellikoff said.

"You can make three telephone calls, when or if I book you. I haven't made up my mind yet. Maybe we can clear this whole thing up, and maybe we can't. All it takes is a little honesty. I mean, one of you guys just has to stop lying to me."

"No one has lied," Bellikoff said quietly. "My friend became confused by geography. We wished to see Shea Stadium . . . in *Queens.* We were trying to make up our minds as to which train to take. We just happened to be standing outside a women's rest room while we debated the subject. That is all. There is nothing more to it."

Detective Feldman pursed his lips and scratched

the back of his ear with a pencil. "And your wallets? What happened to them?"

"I've already told you. We left our wallets at the hotel. Strictly an oversight . . . or carelessness. Call it what you will."

"As long as I have a choice, I'll call it another lie. What kind of an idiot do you take me for?"

"I insist on making that telephone call," Bellikoff said flatly, almost wearily. "I really must insist."

He felt like a fool. He had been attached to Fischer's team for over ten years and he had lost count of the number of missions he had been on, some perilous, some delicate, but all important for one reason or another. Papers were never carried, except impeccably forged ones, so that if the mission failed there would be nothing to link them to their country of origin. This mission had been unexpected and relatively unplanned. There had not been enough time to forge proper documents, but neither had there been any pressing need for them. Fischer was overreacting in this case. Bellikoff had been convinced of this from the start. He had voiced his objections to Sten guns and secrecy, but Fischer had been adamant. Now they were paying an insane price in embarrassment for his obstinacy.

It was not Bellikoff who made the telephone call but Feldman. Fischer was neither surprised nor angry that two of his men were languishing in a station house. He simply listened to the facts of the matter and informed Detective Feldman that he would be there as soon as he could get a taxi. He would clear up the problem to everyone's satisfaction. Even as he talked, his mind was racing ahead. They must leave the Taft at

once and transfer their base to another part of the city. He alerted Levi Yadin and Mordecai Tal, the other members of his team, to get the gear packed and moved to the Hotel Talbot on Twenty-third at Ninth Avenue. Both Yadin and Tal were young, but they had been with Fischer for three years and they knew what was expected of them without having to be told twice. The team would be checked out and all bags and equipment on its way to Chelsea before Fischer had even reached the police station on Eighty-eighth Street.

It took Fischer five minutes. He could be warm and cordial when he wished. It was an act that annoyed Aaron Feldman. Fischer showed Feldman the passports and diplomatic papers of Bellikoff and Belzer, and then dropped hints—one Jew to another—of the precarious existence of the Israeli state and how that existence must be protected at all costs and in a variety of ways, even, perhaps, to the extent of watching a certain lavatory in a subway station.

"These are troubled times," Fischer said. "But any hardship . . . any humiliation is worth the price. No?"

"I gave at the office," Feldman muttered.

"What?"

"Skip it. Just get your friends out of here. I have work to do."

Fischer paused a moment. Feldman was a Jew, but he was also a police officer, a New York City police officer, whose mother probably wanted to visit Israel but who would be more concerned himself about getting his four-year-old Ford to Jones Beach next summer. He would not, on the basis of an assumed kinship, ignore the fact that Israeli security agents were operat-

ing in his territory. Did Italian cops protect the Mafia? Did black cops shrug at militant lawlessness? God may have chosen the Jew, but the New York Police Department didn't. Feldman would be watching.

Fischer forced a tight smile. "Shalom."

"Shalom," Feldman repeated, not looking up. Bastards, he thought. International politics made its own laws, laws that were contemptuous of any others. He had seen men like Fischer before and he had seen what havoc they could cause. He remembered a Dominican student at Columbia a few years back, a young, literate, vocal man who had written a few pieces about the Trujillo clan which had been published in the *Times*. The student disappeared and his friends became concerned. They had reason to be. Feldman found him in a vacant apartment in Morningside Heights, his hands nailed to the floor, his tongue cut out, drowned in his own blood. Politics? Fuck the bastards who took pay to play that game. He picked up the phone and put in a call to Lieutenant Anderozzi. The Taft was on Vic's turf; it might not be a bad idea for a tail to be put on this group of landsleit before they started dropping Arabs out high windows without so much as a burnoose for a parachute.

The call was a good idea, but it was too late; Fischer had cheated and made his move before Feldman got into the game.

Shaft had been black on the streets of Harlem, black in the army, black as a competitor for the largess of white society, but working as porter for Morris Black-

burn, that was the first time he had ever been a nigger. The taste of it was unexpected and so bitter it choked off the constant flow of reality that fed his mind. He fancied himself the victim of a humiliating practical joke. Simon Solomon and his friends were actors, hired from a road company of *Fiddler on the Roof*, to go through this intricate charade that brought John Shaft to a status that was neither man nor boy, animal nor human. But was this—Morris Blackburn's nigger John.

There were others on the block—and that set his head right.

Donovan & Cathcart, Fine Silver, had their Andy. Phelps, Ltd., Interior Design, had their Paul; and Jackson Bean, Gentleman's Tailoring, had their Willie. Andy, Paul, Willie, and John. They sounded like a firm of funky lawyers, or a quartet dancing in drag over the sands of Fire Island. Shaft met them on the second day of his new job when he discovered that they had a traveling social club, meeting in the cellar of one opulent establishment or the other to chew their sandwiches. The street-level structures differed widely in their decor. Donovan & Cathcart was a marble tomb; Phelps, Ltd., was a shimmering fairy world of silk and rosewood; Jackson Bean was little old New York complete with oak paneling and carriage lamps; and Morris Blackburn's was a chatoyance of emerald floating in a cup of diamonds. But under the floorboards, down in the basement pits, they were all the same; dark, cavernous holes filled with boilers, pipes, trash cans, and rust-stained sinks. Even so, he had to work his way down there.

"John, there's been an overflow in the second-floor toilet."

"John, give the front door handles another touch."

"John, the stone setters are complaining that they aren't getting enough heat on the third floor. Check out the ducts, will you?"

He didn't answer, just nodded and did it.

So it went. From seven thirty in the morning until five thirty in the dying day, lifting and hauling, plumbing and polishing, dusting and sweeping, wondering why the dumb motherfuckers who did such work didn't have a union.

The socializing of it took him by surprise. He hadn't figured on any intrusion on his free time. There wasn't a restaurant on that section of Fifth Avenue that catered to the porter trade, so the first day Shaft had been forced to run four blocks with cold winds nipping at his ass to a Nedick's where there had just been time enough to bolt a couple of hot dogs and a Pepsi before running back. On the second day, he had brought his lunch, a hero sandwich bought the night before in a Hudson Street deli and kept in the refrigerator overnight. What the hell, it would give him time to think, flaked out on a cot Elvon had brought to the basement.

But no. As soon as he had settled himself down, there was a tap at the outside door and in came three black men with brown paper bags.

"You ain't Elvon," one of them said.

"We both know that," Shaft said. "But only one of us knows who *you* are."

Shaft was thereupon introduced to the porters' luncheon society that met every Tuesday and Thursday

in the Blackburn basement. Andy, Paul, and Willie. And now including John.

Andy and Paul were both pushing sixty and they walked and talked like Hershey bars left too long in the sun. On the other hand, Willie was a dude, a dapper, small man with yellow-brown skin stretched across the structure of his face like a translucent sheet of old parchment. He could have been twenty-five, he could have been fifty. He had that kind of face. He looked at John with wry amusement, an amusement that bordered on contempt.

"Well, well, well. So you're Elvon's cousin." Willie sat in a chair with his lunch bag between his feet and studied John Shaft from head to toe. "You sure don't look like Elvon."

Shaft shrugged. "He's my cousin, not my poppa."

Andy and Paul thought that was funny and they cackled, then sat down on the edge of the cot and took out their sandwiches.

The four men ate in silence for a moment, chewing away on their food, as remote from the glittering world above them as mummies in a catacomb. Then old Andy started to talk, and, as the words rumbled out of his dark throat, John Shaft began to see the light. He began to understand what he was doing there. These men had soaked up the gossip of the street like crackers in soup, and they passed that gossip from one to the other—and now to Elvon's cousin John—as children used to trade bubble-gum baseball cards. Andy and Paul vied with one another to inform Shaft of the true natures of the men he

worked for. Some of the things they told him about Blackburn he already knew, but he acted suitably surprised.

"Alexander's a faggot?"

"You better believe it, boy," Andy chortled. "You better do the floor with one hand on the broom and the other coverin' you' sweet black ass."

Shaft nodded, smiling.

"What about Blackburn?"

"Oh," Paul said, "you don't have to worry about him none. He is strictly a pussy merchant. Didn't Elvon tell you some of what he does?"

Shaft shook his head.

"He's in a real baaaad way financial. There's some customers—and bill collectors—beginnin' to wonder about him."

Shaft felt like the vacuum cleaner he used on the thick carpeting upstairs, and Paul and Andy needed no encouragement to spread gleanings before him. They competed with one another in telling the life story of Morris Blackburn as they knew it, as they had heard it in bits and pieces from the lips of a thousand customers squeezing the sour juice out of fragments of gossip in the silver halls of Donovan & Cathcart, or among the silken byways of Phelps, Ltd., oblivious to the black men mopping, dusting, polishing.

And while Andy and Paul droned on, Willie, who must have heard his own tales in the oak paneled fitting room of that exclusive tailor, said nothing. He chewed his food and watched Shaft's face. It made Shaft inwardly edgy and hungry for a little gossip about Willie.

The gray, cold afternoon turned swiftly into the cold black of night—as if God had dropped Manhattan in a bucket of primal ooze. Pinched faces, red noses, and chapped lips pointed painfully into the ache-making wind off the Hudson that came churning down the east–west streets with capricious cruelty toward short skirts and cheap cloth.

John Shaft ran down Fifth Avenue toward the subway entrance at Fifty-third Street. There was warmth in all the bodies pressed together, along with the special stink of the New York subway rider.

"Mr. Shaft, why are you prejudiced against the New York subway rider?"

"Well, it ain't the way they look, man but you ever notice how they smell up close? That's a bad smell, man, like they all been dying for a long time and are just about ready to have the dirt throwed on 'em."

That was his prejudice. But they were warm—and the heat was almost enough to carry him across the Village to the squat, square apartment house at the corner of Hudson and Jane streets.

He thought of ducking into the No Name Bar across Hudson, the orange globes of light promising more warmth than he found pressed into the crevice of somebody's backside on the subway, but he didn't. Fuck it! Not dressed like this. He slipped into the building and went up the three flights of stairs, two steps at a time, shot into his own small apartment behind the brightest red door. He left a trail of the stained and sweat-marked uniform across the floor of the apartment —goddamn floor wasn't that clean itself, he thought— and ended up in the bathroom with a hooker of Johnnie Walker Black Label in one hand, a bar of soap in the

other, and a hot spray of water slamming into his face.

If he had a choice at that moment between getting laid and standing there in the shower with a drink in his hand, he'd go for the shower. A piece of ass is a piece of ass, but a hot shower is also a place to think, drink, urinate, pick your nose unobserved, and wash away the smell of your prejudices. He availed himself of all that and emerged a better man for it to wrap on a Japanese kimono and dig up the yellow legal pad on which he was keeping notes. Shaft thumbed through the first ten pages before starting to write the latest additions to the Morris Blackburn dossier.

It made interesting, if chaotic, reading. Gossip about Morris Blackburn ran from amusing tidbits to malicious slander. Shaft had tried to take all these bits and pieces of one thing and another and weave them into a composite. What emerged so far was fragmentary and contradictory, but one thing seemed clear: everyone who had ever said anything about Morris Blackburn agreed that he was a charming sonofabitch, an elegant bastard who'd fuck a snake and then charge her double for jeweled rattlers. He was universally thought of as a money-hungry shark in the waters of the rich, and yet, in spite of his ruthlessness in business and sex —or perhaps because of it—Morris Blackburn was considered a catch by New York hostesses. There were few drawing rooms closed to him—and fewer beds.

"So he's a cocksman," Shaft muttered into his glass. "Who gives a shit?"

Simon Solomon did. He called at precisely seven o'clock to say so.

"Well?" Simon Solomon spoke without formalities. Shaft expected none.

"Nothing startling unless you're interested in his love life."

"One corruption is as grave as the other. What he does with women, he will do with diamonds."

Shaft was tempted to say, "Then we're fucked for sure," but bit back the smart-ass tendency to remark: "There's some talk about a perfect set of black pearls —sold by Blackburn—only one of them turned out to be part of an old beer bottle—"

"I am only interested in diamonds."

When you bought Shaft, you bought his anger. "Oh, bullshit!" he exploded. "The man's caught short in pearls, maybe he tries to get long in diamonds. And maybe one leads to the other."

The old man did not rise to the bait of anger. He grunted—the noise of a man pausing to think.

"Is there anything else you can think of, Mr. Shaft?" Solomon said finally. "Anything at all?"

"Well, like I said, there was talk about this pearl . . . and one of them mentioned that a young black named Deacon has been Blackburn's chauffeur and valet for the last five years. Well, he was laid off last week."

"Discharged?"

"No . . . just laid off on full pay until further notice. Deacon was taking off for Florida. He got enough vacation pay in a lump to put a down payment on a new Maverick. But that argues against rumors that Blackburn is in financial trouble."

"It is . . . interesting," Simon Solomon said after another long, thoughtful pause. "You must place yourself in a position of seeing more, Mr. Shaft. You must

ingratiate yourself. The time has come to move up from the basement."

"Why don't you top that with a couple fast suggestions on how?"

"You're the detective," Simon Solomon said—and hung up.

Ingratiate himself. Shaft sipped the drink and chewed on a knuckle. Shit. He could always play grab-ass with David Alexander. That would get him upstairs. He tried to imagine for a flash just who did what to whom in Alexander's sex life. Who, what, and whom, but not *him!* Maybe there was another way. He picked up the phone to call Amy Taylor-Davis with whom he knew who did what. Now he wanted to know where.

Ben Fischer leaned back in a chair and gazed out the window at the brownstones facing his hotel room. He did not actually see the buildings, even as he stared so intently at them. His inner gaze was fixed on more distant horizons. He felt a sharp pang of longing to be in Revivim, to feel the hot wind off the Negev, to smell the scent of the orange trees of the kibbutz Ehud Shani, to stand on the small hillock where ten victims of a Fedayeen raid lay buried, including his wife and infant son. So long ago. The trees just planted then, struggling for life in the furnace heat of the dry land. Now they covered the valley with their blossoms, mature trees, as old as his son would have been.

Ben Fischer was not a sentimentalist. Memories did not choke him with tears, they only hardened his

anger and toughened his resolve. He had devoted his life to the security of a gerrymandered strip of land so small that, if tossed into the middle of Kansas, it would be lost in the wheat fields. If he had to kill for that land, he would kill. If he had to beg, cajole, blackmail, or threaten for that land, he would do that, too. Only Fischer and two or three men in Tel Aviv understood how vital this current mission was to the future security of the state. Avrim Herzel held a trump card that could beat anything on the table. He had forged a weapon in his laboratory that could bring a nation to its knees. Fischer had planned to take samples of Avrim Herzel's genius to Johannesburg, Amsterdam, London, and New York. He had planned to scatter them like pebbles across the oak conference tables of the world's diamond merchants. How much would DeBeers or the Oppenheimer syndicates pay in guns, tanks, jets, oil, and financial guarantees in order to keep their hold on the diamond market intact? What choice would they have but to pay? Not gladly, but men of power are nothing if not realistic. They would scream and threaten, curse and cry . . . but, in the end, they would pay.

All that awesome power lay in the brain of one old man, and that old man was somewhere in the city of New York. He had to be found and brought back to Israel. He had to be found before someone with less lofty motives for exploiting his discovery found him. That idiot Bellikoff? Fischer squirmed in his seat.

"Did you lose her or did she lose you?"

"She stayed in the rest room a minute too long. She was never aware of us. I am sure of that."

Bellikoff was sure of so many things. He had knowledge, vast knowledge, as one would expect of an ex-Oxford don, but in some ways he was ignorant of human behavior. Cara Herzel was a fastidious human being. She had left the apartment on Eighty-ninth Street where she had been staying and walked to Eighty-sixth in order to take the subway downtown. She would have taken care of all calls of nature before leaving the apartment. She would never, *never* have gone into that public toilet unless she had been conscious of being followed. The proof lay in the fact that Cara Herzel had not returned to the Eighty-ninth Street address, and she never would. The woman's trail was cold. It was dead. She would never lead them to her father. Now there was only one course of action open to them. They must intercept the old man. But where? How?

Ben Fischer stared out at the night. Beyond the dark façades of the old brownstones, the city glittered like a handful of diamonds strewn across black velvet. If one craves an egg, seek out a chicken. Avrim Herzel was a maker of diamonds. He would go where those treasures of pure carbon were bought and sold, traded and pawned. He would go to the diamond district. Somewhere in the glittering gulch of Forty-sixth Street, or in the peripheral establishments that were strung along upper Fifth Avenue like pearls on a string, they would find him. They would take him back to Tel Aviv where he belonged . . . and if anyone stood in their path, then may Jehovah in his wisdom have compassion on them, for Ben Fischer would not.

It was lovely to her, the way the lights shimmered and danced on the dark waters of the East River, the way the cars soared through the spidery webs of the great bridge. Lovely, and somehow serene despite the howl of traffic along Fulton Street. She had been walking for over an hour, through Brooklyn Heights and beside the river, Norman Greenfeld keeping pace with her, his burly form encased in a mackinaw. It was unnatural, Norman Greenfeld thought darkly; no one went on a walking tour of Brooklyn at night. His only consolation was the fact that this tall, tanned, seemingly indefatigable Israeli hadn't gotten it into her head to walk through Red Hook. Be thankful for small mercies. He walked beside her, hating every step, and yet grateful for her presence, her boundless vitality.

Ethel hadn't been the least surprised when he had brought her home. What else could he do? A young girl, looking for her father, groping with English, unsure . . . lost. What could he do? Drop her off at a Traveler's Aid? No, of course not. Ethel had understood. She had fussed over the girl, happy to have her in the house that had always seemed so small while the kids were growing up but was now so large, so empty. Norman Greenfeld had paid for his house in Flatbush by pushing a hack up and down Manhattan for twenty-five years. The meter ticking off a million miles had sent two daughters through Hunter and a son to NYU. Now Esther was raising babies in San Francisco, and Sarah was in Arizona teaching Navajo kids how to read and write, and Ben . . .

Ben would have liked this girl. Norman Greenfeld

had decided that the moment she had stepped into his cab. Ben had always gone for tall, leggy girls who played tennis, girls who could keep pace with his booming stride. Any girl who enjoyed walking through Brooklyn Heights on a cold November night would have been Ben's joy. He and Ethel had told Cara all about the girls but they had said nothing about Ben. He had been dead for six months, dead in a Tokyo hospital after stepping on a land mine in Vietnam. The doctor who had written to them from Tokyo, a Major Sweeney, had been mercifully brief as to the extent of Ben's injuries, but he had suggested they not plan to visit him. Now Ben was dead . . . a long time dead, a lifetime dead. Norman Greenfeld glanced at the girl beside him. Yes. Ben would have liked her.

"I think we should walk over to Flatbush Avenue and get a bus. It's gettin' cold . . . and late."

She stopped in mid-stride and looked at him, almost in astonishment that he was beside her. She had been lost in her own thoughts, oblivious to everything but her own monumental problems. She stared into Norman Greenfeld's cold-pinched, breath-laboring face and her heart ached with contrition. This man who had performed one *mitzvah* after another was cold and tired while she had walked on, unthinking, unfeeling.

"I'm sorry, forgive me."

"That's okay. It's just . . . you know . . . I ain't used to using my feet. I spend my life on my *toches*."

"We shall go back then . . . to the bus . . . slowly."

"A *zaideh* I'm not, but you know, I ain't exactly up to walking over Kings County. When you walk, you *walk*."

"I was thinking. I have much on my mind." A tug hooted far out across the black and the cold, a dismal, lonely sound. "I worry about him. You are not a *zaideh*, but he is. He is seventy-three years old, my father. He left Israel with nothing but a light suit and a thin overcoat."

"Did he have any money?"

"Some. I don't know how much, but it must have been little. He was not a rich man."

Norman Greenfeld walked in silence for a moment. He didn't like to pry, but he was concerned for this girl and wanted to reassure her if he possibly could.

"If he ran out of money, that doesn't mean he's begging on the streets. Did he have anything of value that he could sell or hock?"

She thought of the gems that Fischer said he had been carrying. What gems? Her mother had left very little jewelry . . . a few thin gold bracelets . . . a small ruby set in a locket. There had once been a diamond ring, but her mother had told her the story many times of how the diamond had been sold to help them in their flight from Germany. No, there had been no gems of value in the Herzel home. And yet Fischer had mentioned gems.

"I think . . . he had some gems."

"Ah," Norman Greenfeld sighed. "Gems. Loose gems?"

"I don't know. Perhaps."

"That makes things a bit easier. You know, this looking in synagogues is hopeless. There are like maybe two thousand of 'em in Manhattan alone. But if a man wants to sell some loose stones, there is only one place he's going to go. Glitter Gulch. Tomorrow I drop

you off on Forty-sixth Street and you just keep walkin'. In one block, you cover as many possibilities as you do in all of Brooklyn. There's even a temple, right in the middle."

5

DAWN HIT THE WINDOWS and turned the bedroom into a blue grotto far beneath the sea. It was a nice place to sleep. But Shaft hadn't gotten any. Neither had the long, slender column of flesh murmuring beside him and reaching for him yet again as he rose from the crumpled swirl of sheets. She tried to pull him back, her hands slipping on the wetness of his flesh.

"Bring back a bottle of Perrier from the fridge," she sighed, falling back languidly against a pile of pillows.

He grinned at her. "I got a dozen floors to mop."

He went into the bathroom to shower and shave. It occurred to him the blade in her razor was always new while he kept running out. When he came back to get his underwear, she was huddled against the headboard with the blanket wrapped around her body like a cocoon. He smiled at her, but she didn't smile back.

"You're a drug," she said.

"Sure," he said, stepping into his shorts. "So are you. And it ain't sleeping pills. That gives us something in common."

"Not common," she smiled. "That gives us something in spectacular."

She had gotten herself the soda water and offered him a slug of it. He turned it down. If she didn't want to make a cup of coffee, he wasn't going to ask—and he went out the door with the dry mouth of too many kisses in too many places in a night of who and whom doing what. Hell of it was, he'd probably faint headfirst into a toilet bowl, he was so tired. Whee-yoo! She had a Maserati gearbox built into her pelvis, five forward speeds, two reverse, and he was a bucket of wet dishrags.

He was late. Being late as John Shaft didn't mean a good goddamn. Being late as an anonymous burrhead porter, easily replaced and, consequently, easily intimidated, was another, sadder story. He jogged for the subway, muttered, "Rat fuck goddamn trains," for being slow, but went unnoticed because most of the platform crowd were muttering the same thing.

Uptown, he ran the three blocks from the subway exit but he still couldn't make up ten minutes. A hell of a way to start ingratiating himself. Helmut Zinder, who served in the capacity of both doorman and general overseer of the hired hands, and, Shaft thought, probably collected skin lampshades as a hobby, ticked him off in the locker room that took up one small portion of the basement.

"You're late."

"I knows it. My alarm clock got stole." He flashed his teeth. Ingratiating, right? "You put your teeth in a glass o' water beside the bed, there's people in my neighborhood would steal the teeth and drink the water."

Helmut Zinder grunted and looked away, studying his image in the full length mirror that graced his locker door. He looked, as always, superb.

"Don't make a habit of it. Buy a new clock."

"I'll sure do that. I surely will."

Shaft went to work with verve and speed, running the mop over the green marble entranceway, following it up with the floor-polishing machine. The clerks began to arrive, trooping in with the august dignity befitting so illustrious a firm. They were elderly men for the most part, but there were also a few butterflies in Cardin suits, their gold ID bracelets clinking as they brushed wrists.

Shaft kept his eye out for Alexander as he ran the vacuum cleaner over the thick carpets in the main showroom. Nine o'clock came . . . and then nine thirty, but the willowy figure of the manager failed to appear. The great Blackburn himself arrived at ten o'clock sharp, and Shaft, who was running a polishing cloth across a counter top, jumped to the elevator and pressed the button for him.

"Morning, Mr. Blackburn," he said. Ingratiating, right?

Blackburn looked right through him and stepped into the elevator without a word. Black may be beautiful, but who can see it? The invisible man went back to polishing counters, wishing upon Blackburn a fate worse than having his balls caught in the elevator door.

Fuck him. Shaft resumed his lookout for Alexander. One way or another, he had to open a few more doors into the salon's inner sanctum. The world above the basement and the first floor was closed to Shaft. He knew that there were stonecutters and setters on the

upper floors, as well as vaults and steel-sheathed storage rooms. But the bent, gnarled, and foreign-looking men who worked on those floors were as remote from Shaft as Mississippi cotton choppers. They came and left the building through a separate entrance—a steel door in the narrow alleyway that separated Blackburn's from Donovan & Cathcart, a door that was opened with a plastic punch card as the coded key. This building within a building had to be laid open to his view, and the only possible way that this could happen would be to use David Alexander as the can opener. It was not a pleasant thought.

But as Anderozzi once asked him, "How many times do you expect to step in shit and come up covered with roses?"

Maybe once more. Maybe.

"I got somethin' to talk over with Mr. Alexander," he said to Mrs. Baxter at the switchboard, a woman who looked like a leftover baked apple at the automat on Fifty-ninth Street. "You know what time he be in?"

Mrs. Baxter eyed him coldly. He looked like the same baked apple with the skin-blackening scrofula to her.

"He went to Cleveland. He won't be back for three days." She stabbed a plug into a hole in response to a flicking light.

"Morris Blackburn's," she cooed. "May I help you?"

Three days! That was a kick in the ass. Old Elvon was going to start yelling for his job back—or another thousand dollars—within three days. Cleveland? Nobody went to Cleveland—they only ran away from it.

Morris Blackburn entered the quiet luxury of his office and sank into a black leather chair. He felt numb, deadened. He had a headache that no amount of aspirin could ever touch, let alone soothe. His nerves were thin strands of taut wire. He was on the edge of a breakdown; he was convinced of that. And there was a part of him that cursed the day old Avrim Herzel had walked into his life and presented him with the key to Golconda. It was not a simple formula that the old man had. There was nothing written down on paper. It was all in the old fool's head. All that he had given Blackburn had been a list of what would be needed before he could get to work producing diamonds, emeralds, and rubies. Herzel had been appreciative of the laboratory that had been provided for him in what had once been a storage room, just as he was appreciative of the comforts that had been provided for him in Morris's spacious apartment overlooking the East River. But although the apartment was more than adequate for his needs, the workroom was not. It was merely a room. He required much more. Just how much more had come as a shock to Blackburn, one which he would be a long time getting over. The list that Herzel had given to him seemed endless, and the cost of the apparatus staggering. Truly staggering. But it had to be provided. He had had no choice, and the $200,000 that it required had pushed him to the brink of penury. Now the only solution to his immediate fiscal problems was to send David Alexander on another business trip. Or was it a pleasure trip for young David? Blackburn was uncertain.

The cool blue stones that served David Alexander for eyes had never given a hint of his deeper emotions, the thin, petulant lips no clue. David Alexander was loyal, trustworthy, honest, dependable, and willing. He was also a crazy faggot. A psychopath? Blackburn didn't care to think about it. Some day, of course, he would be forced to do something about him. There would come a time in the foreseeable future when David's presence would be not only an embarrassment, but a jeopardy. Morris Blackburn placed the tips of his well-manicured fingers to his throbbing head. He did not wish to think about David's future at this time. He uttered a silent prayer for the relief of his own pain and the success of David's current quest.

Beautiful, David Alexander thought, truly beautiful. He watched the young man over the rim of his sunglasses. A god, a vision, a statue by Praxiteles, all golden flesh and smoothly muscled limbs. He watched the young man rub oil over his body and then stretch out on a mat beside the pool, his face tilted to the sun, his legs spread indolently, almost lasciviously. Two girls in bikinis walked by, looked down at this glowing youth, and were hungry.

"Silly cunts," David Alexander hissed under his breath.

He shuddered slightly despite the hot wind that swept across the pool area. The striped awning over the patio slapped in the wind like the sail of a schooner, and he noticed with some distaste that there was a fine film of sand on the table at which he was lunching.

Arizona! Why did the rich find this wilderness at-

tractive? It was beyond his comprehension, but like it they did. The hard, baked canyons and the dun-colored wastes appealed to them. It was another Miami Beach, though not as vulgar. The money here was older, more solid, not quite so dependent on the fluctuations of the stock market. There were scores of elderly men and women spending their winters here, turning their sagging bodies to deep brown leather. The darkness of skin cried out for diamonds, and in the evenings, when the women of Scottsdale paraded their charms and their wealth, the sparkle of diamonds vied with the stars in the blue-black sky.

David Alexander finished his glass of iced tea, paid his bill—which was outrageous—and wandered into the spacious lobby of the Casa Verde Hotel. It was now 12:33 P.M. Time was running short. He must finish his business in Scottsdale, take a taxi to the Phoenix airport, and catch the two thirty jet for Chicago in order to make a connection that would get him back to Cleveland at a reasonable hour. He had waited long enough. Buying a newspaper at the tobacco counter, he strolled casually to the elevator, his nose buried in the financial section of the *Phoenix Sun*. There was nothing about David Alexander's clothes, attitude, or reading matter that would set him apart as anything but a guest at the hotel. He got out at the third floor and walked down the spacious corridor to Room 327. According to his calculations and his knowledge of the man's habits, Leopold Fishbein would be preparing to set out on his rounds at this very moment. It had never been known in the trade for Leopold to see anyone before one o'clock in the afternoon. There was certainly nothing unusual in this, it was just Leopold's way of doing things. The

jewelry industry was composed of retailers who never deviated from methods of business common to them all, and gem salesmen who were notoriously individualistic and quirky. These dealers in loose stones always amazed David Alexander. They invariably looked as though life had crushed the last vestige of ambition out of them, Willy Lomans *shlepping* from one store to another with their wares crammed into old leather bags. Their lack of precaution was legendary—and some of them were paying for it now.

He tapped lightly on the door.

"Yes? Who is it?" The voice beyond the door was deep, guttural.

"David Alexander . . . from Morris Blackburn's."

The door was opened immediately and Leopold Fishbein, a short, moon-faced man in a crumpled gray suit ushered David Alexander into his room with undisguised delight.

"In Arizona yet?"

"We're planning a salon here in Scottsdale," David Alexander said blandly. "Perhaps we can do a little . . . preliminary business. That is, if you can spare a few minutes."

"Sure . . . sure . . . always a few minutes. I was going out, but it's no matter. Sit down . . . sit down."

David Alexander seated himself and reached casually into the inside pocket of his jacket, as though for a pack of cigarets. Leopold Fishbein stood in front of him, rocking slowly back and forth on his heels.

"So how is Morris?"

"Morris is fine." It was too delicious. The man smiling down at him, trusting, at ease. He gripped the

handle of the .32 caliber automatic and drew it out of his pocket. The handmade silencer bulged at the end of the barrel, the small hole in the tube of steel pointing directly at Leopold Fishbein's forehead.

"What—," he said in surprise; but any question he meant to ask was never uttered. The gun made a sharp, gasping sound, like the cough of an asthmatic. A crimson flower burst across Leopold Fishbein's pallid face and he was dead before his body hit the floor.

"There she is," Mordecai Tal said.

Levi Yadin scowled. He could see nothing but crowds . . . all forest and no trees. "Are you sure?"

"Positive. She just stepped into that store across the street. Kay's . . . the small place next to Mandelbaum's."

"Shall we wait here or go over?"

"I'll wait. You call Fischer and tell him where we are."

What incredible luck! The task had sounded hopeless—find *one* woman in a city like New York. What was it they used to say about Shepheard's Hotel in Cairo? If you sat in the lobby long enough, everyone in the world would pass through. Perhaps they had such a saying regarding the corner of Forty-seventh Street and Sixth Avenue. He would inquire about it. Young Mordecai was a very literal-minded man with a love for facts and odd scraps of information. He was also incredibly patient and persistent, attributes that made him invaluable for what the team called "find the thimble" jobs. Bellikoff had coined that phrase. It was the name of a

party game played in England. A thimble was hidden in a huge barrel of sawdust and the children had to fish for it with their hands in order to win a prize. Now Mordecai had found the thimble, and he would never let go of it.

The team followed Cara all day, along Forty-seventh to Sixth Avenue and then up to Forty-eighth and east on that street to Second Avenue. There wasn't a jewelry store that she didn't enter. The woman's energy was astounding—and her purpose plain.

"She has no idea where he is," Fischer said. He sat in a drugstore with Bellikoff and Belzer, the three of them huddled in the end booth near the pay phones. They were drinking New York tea—a mug of hot water and a skimpy teabag.

"It might be a ruse," Bellikoff said. "If what you believe is true, that she was aware of us following her, this could be simply a way to lead us off the scent."

Fischer dumped some sugar into his cup and stirred it abstractedly. "She was aware of you and Enoch . . . I'm convinced of that . . . but I believe she feels safe now. No. She is looking for her father. I told her about the gems—not everything, you understand, but she knows that he has some precious stones. Her reasoning is simple enough. He has gems and might try to sell them."

"She has a point," Belzer said.

Fischer's smile was cryptic. "I'm afraid that Cara Herzel does not understand the complexities of her father's mind."

Belzer sighed and lit a cigaret. "Then, why are we wasting time in following her?"

The pay phone rang and Bellikoff jumped up to answer it. It was Levi. Cara Herzel was now at the corner of Forty-ninth Street and Third, going west, but more slowly now in the cold of the dead day.

"Levi says she seems to be looking for a taxi," Bellikoff informed them.

Fischer nodded as though everything was going exactly as he had imagined it would. "Have them trail her. Find out where she is staying and then come back to the hotel." He studied Belzer for a second. The man was intelligent, but like most Sephardim, he failed to grasp the character of the Ashkenazim. He could speak Hebrew, Ladino, English, Spanish, Portuguese, and French. He could also speak Yiddish. That is, he could mouth the words, but the nuances of the language, the puns and shades of meaning, were beyond his grasp. He also failed to understand the people who spoke it best—the New York Jews.

"Tell me, Enoch . . . do you know the meaning of the word *mishpocheh?*"

"Naturally . . . family, relatives . . . why?"

"It embraces more than that. It is an attitude of brotherhood, of belonging. It is what kept the Jews together when they came to this city from Europe. That is, when the Ashkenazim came. They still have this attitude. They also have *rachmones*—which goes deeper than mere compassion. Cara Herzel is a stranger, a beautiful young girl looking for a lost father . . . an old German Jew. She is talking to elderly men who know what it is to be lost . . . who know what it is to wander. She is asking questions in a world that holds few secrets. Someone in this district *must* have come across

Avrim Herzel. His heart will go out to this girl, this *landsman*, and even if Avrim is in hiding, he will engineer a way of taking her to him. The way may be devious, but he will find a way. Now do you still ask me why we follow her?"

"No. We follow her."

"And we find *him*."

Avrim Herzel ate in silence, as was his custom, concentrating not so much on his food as on his thoughts. He was oblivious to Morris Blackburn, who sat at the other end of the Louis XIV table picking gingerly at his plate of boiled chicken and *lokshen*. A great weariness had descended upon Herzel. It covered his frail body like a heavy, suffocating cloak.

Only the mind skips, he thought bitterly, time's little jest. Time robs the body of its strength but sends the brain racing like a young goat. So many memories astounded him with their clarity. He pushed his plate to one side and gazed fondly at Morris, Wolf's son . . . little Moishe. He had always been a finicky eater.

"Do you remember the day your father and I took you to the zoo in the Tiergarten? You wore a sailor suit, Moishe, and I bought you a raspberry ice."

"I don't remember those days," Blackburn replied tautly.

"I feel sorry for you. There is so much beauty in the past."

"In America, we look to the future . . . and so do I."

Herzel nodded sagely. "That is because you are

young. You have a future to look to. But it is our yesterdays that have made it possible. You must never forget that."

Morris Blackburn groaned inwardly. He detested the elderly and their damned moralizing. Old Jews were the worst. Every one was a philosopher. The only thing that made this one at all bearable was the fact that he was also an alchemist, a wizard, a bringer of riches.

"I feel strongly about the past," Blackburn said. "Every Jew is keenly aware of the millions who died . . . the people, my parents included, who were sacrificed. Now all of that is behind us, Avrim. The world goes on . . . but I believe we owe them a debt . . . a debt that must be paid." He mouthed what he knew the old fool wanted to hear.

Herzel smiled. "Yes, Moishe, we owe them a debt. It took the holocaust to stir the conscience of the Gentiles. Now we have Israel. A sacred trust." He sipped a little water and rose from the table. "I am very tired, Moishe . . . terribly tired."

Blackburn stood up with genuine concern. "You've been working too hard. Please . . . go to bed . . . rest."

Herzel waved a hand impatiently. "No. I shall rest when we settle one matter. I have written something I wish you to sign. It is a covenant between us. I give to you the secret of my process on the sole condition that the gems produced will be given freely to the world as a gift, in the name of *Eretz Yisroel.* They must not be used as weapons for barter to the highest bidder . . . nor to destroy an industry . . . only to bolster it, to cleanse it. All this must be done diplomatically and with great

tact and judgment. The diamond is a product of blood and pain . . . of sweat and fear. Black men toil their lives away a mile deep in the ground to get the stones. Men have murdered for them. The diamond should be red for all the blood that has been shed on it. I . . . *we* can change that. The Herzel diamonds will be pure . . . holy."

Blackburn eyed him as though from a great distance. The man was mad, of that he was convinced. A poor, mad Jew mouthing incoherent philosophies. Mad he might be, but the process was sound. There was no flaw in Avrim Herzel's work, only in his thinking.

"I agree with you completely, Avrim. You can be assured that I will do everything in my power to turn your dream into a reality."

"Thank you, Moishe . . . thank you. I want to go back to Jerusalem as soon as possible. The equipment you have bought is excellent. What a remarkable country this America is. I ask for such obscure items and phfft, there they are, just like that. Amazing."

"All it takes is money." Blackburn's tone was bleak.

"It will not be necessary for me to produce the stones. I will show you what must be done. It is simple . . . terribly simple. Like baking a cookie . . . a little *kichlach.* I will spend one more week with you. I will explain how I use the borazon and the furnace . . . the centrifuge and the lasers. You must listen well, Moishele. But you are smart . . . clever . . . you will learn."

Morris Blackburn felt a stirring in his loins. The sight of the world's most beautiful woman begging his pleasure couldn't have aroused him more. A faint sheen of sweat beaded his forehead.

"Yes, *Onkel* Avrim . . . I can learn."

God in heaven, yes. Learn and absorb. He almost felt sorry for the poor *shlemiel.* He almost felt sorry that the old man would have to die. Almost, but not quite.

Shaft's apartment was neither white nor black, left nor right, young nor old. Its decor was simply New York bachelor. Hundreds of young girls have cleaned up apartments like that, occasionally in order to retrieve their lingerie, but more often from compassion. They struggled with highball glasses stuck to the porcelain of the refrigerator or the varnish of the dresser, they sneezed over a three-month collection of cigaret butts in the ashtrays, they sighed over footprints that trailed across dusty floors like Robinson Crusoe's in the sand, scraped their bottoms or knees and elbows (depending on the position) on sandpaper sheets. These monumental labors, putting such places clean and orderly, were paid for in the currency of arrogant, momentary lust and the knowledge that tomorrow, rain or shine, the joint would be a mess again. And Shaft liked it that way, what'd he give a shit if there was dust all over the stack of tapes and records, so long as they still went into the machine and music came out, so long as there was something to pour coffee or scotch into and drink out of (wondering about the minute flotsam that rose to the surface). He'd be double-damned if Amy was going to persuade him to let some gumdrop come in and turn it into a plastic paradise the way he had his now-detestable office.

"Bullshit!" he said aloud, stripping off the uniform

of slavery in the seventies, throwing shirt, slacks, and socks in various directions.

Still, she was under his skin, and he was realist enough to admit it. A splinter that made a small infection and throbbed when he brushed it against something. He walked out of the bedroom, naked down to the watch he'd put on the bathroom sink shelf while he showered, and discovered he had company.

"Hello, Elvon's cousin John," said Willie, the silent porter, pointing a foreign-looking automatic at Shaft's midriff, making a target of the three scars Shaft had brought back from Vietnam.

The taut yellow mask of Willie's face shifted slightly in what passed for a smile. "I don't like doorbells. I don't like liars . . . and I don't like you, Elvon's cousin John."

A nastly little man, but a killer? "Fine with me," Shaft said. "We just won't have lunch together no more."

"I know who you are and I know what you're up to. I ain't no fool." Willie was trying to convince him of something. Under the circumstances, it could be anything from a demand for involvement to a disavowal of penis envy.

"Well," Shaft said, "you got to be something of a fool if this is a beauty parade or you're goin' to take advantage of me at gunpoint."

Willie looked annoyed. Up yours, Shaft told himself. The silly motherfucker might shoot simply because he didn't know how to play.

"You make all the funny remarks you want," Willie said, easing himself into a chair, "but one funny move

and I blow you out into the street with the rest of the garbage."

Shaft sighed and waited. What else? The worst he could do to Willie in this condition was maybe piss on his shoes. It didn't compare with being shot in the head. No way.

"Okay," he said. "You got a reason for this bullshit? . . ."

"I got a hundred thousand dollars' worth of reason," Willie said. "I got four years of my life on the line. And I ain't throwin' that all down the drain for a burrhead bastard like you!"

Was Willie drunk? Popskull stoned? Or just normal New York crazy?

"Why don't you put the heat down, man, and tell me the story? We're friends, aren't we? Lunch buddies. Come on, man, put the gun down and fix yourself a drink."

"I never drink," Willie said, almost piously.

"So you don't drink. Put the gun down anyway."

Willie shook his head. Shaft measured the distance but the little man was too far away. With each word, he had inched a little closer, but not close enough.

"I'm not puttin' the gun down until I'm done with you. We're goin' out of here together first to—"

"Like this?"

"We'll get some clothes on you, nigger, but we do it my way."

"Okay," Shaft agreed. He even smiled. "But one little thing—brother to brother. There's one thing I got to do about my condition."

"Condition?"

"Yeah. It just takes a minute, but the doctor says I got to do it to keep the head of my cock from falling off."

Poor Willie. Stupid Willie. It was outrageous, but he was a man, and he had to take his eyes off the main body of Shaft and examine the terrible affliction.

He never got a chance to look up. The flat heel of Shaft's hand crushed Willie's fine nose into a bloody marshmallow. The other waved aside the gun for recovery later. And when Willie was bent over, choking and moaning, Shaft kicked the small man in his slender throat and sent him rolling across the floor, silently clawing at his windpipe with the anguish of suffocation.

"If you want the night nurse," Shaft said, moving toward the bathroom, picking up the gun on the way, "just push the little red button. The green one turns on the Muzak." The automatic was Spanish. He popped the clip, emptied seven cartridges from it and another from the chamber, then quickly disassembled it into ten or twelve essential pieces, using a nail file to unscrew the grips and reach the heavy spring that made it all work. When all the parts were laid out on the toilet tank, he opened the window. The night wind wrinkled the flesh of his chest and arms into a sharp shiver. He threw the pieces of the automatic out the window and heard them rain down in a cheery clatter on the street and the tops of cars crouched jealously in their parking places along Jane Street.

Then he took a shower and speculated on Willie's presence in his life. By the time he finished and went back into the living room, Shaft wasn't even angry at the crumpled invader curled into a corner, retching and gasping hoarsely over a small pool of blood.

"You throw up on my floor, you sonofabitch, and you gonna clean it up."

The telephone rang right on schedule. He didn't have a damn thing to tell Simon Solomon and he wasn't in the mood for any fatherly advice. He pulled on a pair of slacks, a pullover, and slipped into a pair of loafers, then sat on the couch, smoked a cigaret, and watched Willie try to stay alive.

It took Willie another half-hour to forty-five minutes to make it back into the world of John Shaft. His eyes blinked and the fog drifted out of them.

"Hey, fuckhead—pay attention," Shaft said, "I'm going to break about nine bones in your legs and put you out with the rest of the garbage 'bout ten minutes from now. But before I start, what the hell you doing here?"

Willie glared hatred, said nothing. Shaft nodded. He reached behind the couch and came out with a baseball bat that was something of a joke with the softball crowd in Central Park; he wouldn't let anyone use it and wouldn't play without it—three dollars' worth of hickory that felt just right in his hands.

He slapped the bat in one hand, holding the grip in the other. Willie's eyes widened in disbelief. People carried guns and shot each other, or knives and slashed each other. They didn't have ball bats to break you into pieces.

"Let's hear it, Willie," Shaft said. He reached out and tapped Willie on the ankle with the bat. Willie cringed.

"You trying to take my deal," Willie moaned.

"Huh? What the hell you talkin' about? I got my own mop and pail. I don't need yours."

Willie scowled and felt gingerly at the pulpy tomato that was once a nose. "You're John Shaft, ain't you . . . the detective?"

"Do I look like a goddamn cop?"

Willie thought, then went on, "I got your number. I got a friend told me all about you."

A friend? Who could this asshole know and call friend who also knew Shaft? They were such worlds apart. They didn't know anybody who . . . oh, shit! "Elvon! You been talking with Elvon Drew, right?"

Willie merely grunted. His hard little eyes were like red agates. "What'd he say?" Shaft asked. There was a fat pause. Shaft waggled the bat again, took a shortcut with it that almost decapitated a lamp and would have put Willie just beyond second base, rolling toward the right-field wall. The guys in the park would have cheered. Willie almost shat . . . and started to babble. "Elvon is been drinking and flashing some big bills around. Elvon told me you gave him like three or maybe *four* thousand dollars so you could work at Blackburn's and plan to rob the store."

"And I stepped on your caper. You got the place marked for yourself."

"Something like that," Willie muttered, eyes never leaving the business end of the bat.

Shaft grinned. "You crazier than most niggers, Willie. They get themselves killed for pennies, robbin' delis 'n' pullin' shit on dark streets that don't pay as much as two hours work. But you!—you were gonna get killed coppin' shit out of Morris Blackburn's jewel box."

He laughed uproariously.

Willie felt the lash of each yak. "You think not?" he said.

"I *know* not, asshole," Shaft snorted. "Forget it. You buy a hot ten-dollar pistol and you figure you're in business. You can pick a lock and you think you've got it made. You're pathetic, Willie. But good luck, because I always like to see a brother go to the top, even if it's only to get shot full of holes. You want to knock off Blackburn, go ahead and try. Get your idiot fuckin' head blown off. But I've got a job to do there . . . for a client. I'm not ripping off your turf, so don't rip mine. I'll be the hell out of your way in a week, maybe two. And it's all yours."

Willie couldn't believe it. Shaft sighed, "Go on, get the hell out of here."

Willie stumbled to his feet. "Where's my gun?"

"Out in the goddamn street—where you belong. Go on, beat it."

Shaft pointed the way with the ball bat.

Willie moved toward the door.

"You just think I ain't gonna make it with the Blackburn place." It was the voice of wounded pride. "But I got me a way. I can get into that buildin' any damn time I want to. I've been through the place a dozen times . . . from top to bottom. I ain't took nothin' because I ain't ready for that yet . . . not quite."

Was he just talking? Or . . . ?

"You're crap to the eyes," Shaft taunted.

"Oh, no. It ain't talk. I been in every room. I know every corner of the place. They keep the rough stones on the third floor . . . in a time-lock safe. That safe is all electronic, and I been studyin' electronics. I been

studyin' that shit for four years. I think I can open it. I had it in my mind that you figured you could open it, too."

Jesus, Shaft thought, he believes it. He really believes he can parlay a four-year subscription to *Popular Mechanics* into a hundred-thousand-dollar gem haul. Sing Sing was full of men who had thought the same thing. There was something heroic about such folly. But had he really been through the building?

Shaft had to find out—and how it was done. He raised the bat and laid Willie down the third-base line —just hard enough to put him out and loosen him up about his scheme.

6

SHE WAS OUT OF PLACE in Blackburn's and she sensed it the moment she came through the doors to stand, wet-haired and dripping, on the deep champagne-colored carpeting. The Prussian soul of Helmut Zinder writhed in silent protest. The Blackburn establishment was not a place for the casual shopper. It was not Korvette's. Perhaps in the springtime clients might stroll down Fifth Avenue and walk in off the street, but not on a slush-rainy November afternoon. Helmut Zinder stood under the long awning with an umbrella, ready to open the doors of taxi or limousine on coiffured elegance in hot pants or eighty-dollar velour blue jeans. But Cara Herzel? She entered his glacial line of vision walking across Fifth Avenue against the DON'T WALK sign. She was certainly a girl worth watching. Tall, tanned, leggy, her dark hair touching her shoulders, glistening with rain. Very European, Helmut concluded, moving with the unhurried pace of a girl he once knew in Paris—or was it Vienna? He had expected her to walk by with perhaps one wistful glance through the tall glass doors, but she had stopped under the

awning, hesitated a moment, and then had started inside.

Helmut Zinder snapped forward in his best court executioner manner to do his duty and discourage her from entering.

But she turned her head and smiled at him—a lovely, fleeting smile, rain-washed and exquisite. It stopped him. She was part of some sophisticated elite, among those who move with the strength of some mission in life. Even great whores have the quality. He opened the door and now she was inside, in the radiant warmth. The raincoat that Norman Greenfeld had talked her into buying at S. Klein's, that clothing madhouse on Union Square, for $5.95 clung to her body like a sheet of sodden blotting paper. The coat did not resist water; it held each drop close with a lover's embrace. Her hair dripped and her shoes squelched. She had walked into the salon with a certain grace and aplomb, but the utter majesty of the foyer stunned her. She felt, physically felt, the flicker of monetary measurement being taken by the eyes of the young clerk who glided toward her on winged feet.

"May I help you?" It was obvious to Peter Day that this wet creature off the streets had wandered into the wrong store, hoping to find that rarest of New York jewels, a pay phone that worked, or the second rarest, a clean, private—but open to the public—place to urinate.

"Perhaps," she replied, her voice low, embarrassed. She found it impossible to look at this young man. He seemed ready to strike her for the impertinence of being in his vision. "I'm looking for my father, Avrim Herzel."

"Your father?" Peter Day frowned. Jesus, Mary, where did they come from? Fart-face was supposed to be a good Nazi and stop them at the door. "Does he work here?"

Cara shook her head. Opening her handbag, she brought out a photograph of her father that had been taken five years before in the garden of a friend's house in Tel Aviv. Avrim Herzel was seated in a canvas deck chair, wearing shorts and an open-necked shirt. He was smiling at the camera, rather stiffly and self-consciously, but it was a good likeness. Peter Day stared at the photograph and he couldn't have been more confused if Cara had flashed a dirty postcard at him. If the old fuck had any sense, he was back where the snap was taken, scratching his dry balls in the sun.

"I . . . well . . . I really couldn't say. . . ."

"He might have come in here," Cara said. She spoke slowly, pronouncing every word cleanly and distinctly . . . English by the well-bred foreigner. "He might have come here to sell some stones."

"Stones?" Peter Day was rattled by the unexpected. He went to witchcraft classes three nights a week, and everything—every goddamn bitching little thing—seemed to hold some ominous portent. He looked around for help.

"Yes, stones . . . gems . . . perhaps you have seen him, yes?"

"No. Goodness, no. This is not a shop where gems are bought that way. One doesn't come in off the street and sell *stones* here."

He made a move to turn away from her and she reached out and took hold of his sleeve. "Please . . .

you did not really look. Please . . . *please* look at the picture again."

Her voice had risen, a grating intrusion which caused heads to turn.

"I must ask you to leave," Peter Day snapped. "I don't have to look at the picture again. I've never seen that man before in my life."

The harshness of her reception in this place stunned her. For days she had been going from one store to the next, asking the same question, showing the same picture. She had been treated with kindness everywhere. People had cared. They had looked at the picture carefully, made comments about it. . . .

Look at that face! A real patriarch . . . a regular Ben Gurion of a face, only his ears don't stick out so much.

They had talked to her in Hebrew . . . in Yiddish . . . in German, and had made her welcome even though they had been unable to help her.

Such a man I would remember. Believe me, should I see him I will call you . . . and, God willing, I shall see him.

But this *goy* was turning away from her, turning his back on her problem. *Zeeser Gottenyu!* It was too much. The hysteria that had never been far from her throat since that terrible day when Ben Fischer had told her about her father's flight now rose on black wings. She felt herself falling away from reality. She could tell that people were staring at her, but she didn't know why. She sensed dimly that she was screaming, but all she could hear was a great roaring in her ears, and then the roaring faded and she could hear and see nothing. Nothing at all.

Peter Day condescended to catch Cara Herzel

before she hit the floor. He held her gingerly, afraid that the vile plaid raincoat she was wearing might stain his fawn beige wool jacket. He felt nothing but loathing toward this obviously demented girl who had shattered the tranquility of his day. Helmut scurried in from outside and took the loathsome girl from him. They deserved each other—fart-face and the fainting howler.

"Take her out the back," he squealed. "Call a policeman if she starts screaming again."

Swine of a fairy, Helmut thought as he took the limp, damp burden from Peter Day's arm. He carried Cara through a curtained doorway and down the steps into the basement.

Levi Yadin saw her faint. He had paused outside the doors to light a cigaret and had seen her collapse into the arms of a clerk. He had stepped to one side as the uniformed doorman hurried past him and then he had signaled for Mordecai Tal, who was part way up the block, seemingly absorbed in the contents of a window display.

"Something has happened," Levi said as his partner joined him. "The girl has fainted. It may be a ruse to draw us off. There must be a back door. Cover it."

"Shit, man. What am I supposed to do with her?"

"Get her out of here when she comes to. If she screams . . ."

"*Screams?*" Shaft said. "What the hell has she got to scream about?"

"I don't know," Helmut said. "She came into the store, screamed, and fainted."

"Yeah? Maybe they showed her a price tag."

The doorman gave Shaft a stony look. "You are the custodian here, not the house comedian."

"Fuck off. Last time I looked at the list of people I take shit from around here, your name wasn't on it."

They confronted each other over Cara's form.

"If I had you in the army for a week," Helmut began.

"Maybe *your* army, baby. But if we was back in mine, you'd be hopping around like an Easter bunny with a hand grenade up your ass."

The girl was stirring . . . groaning. Helmut Zinder's anger lost its focus as he glanced at her. "Take her out the back way and find a taxi," he said. He fumbled a five-dollar bill out of his pocket and handed it to Shaft. "Give this to the driver if she has no money. Mr. Day does not want her up front again . . . he'll call the police if she comes back."

And then he went loping back to his post. The faithful sentinel at the gates of luxury.

Shaft looked down at the girl and the girl looked up at him. They were both wary.

"You going to scream again?"

Cara's expression was blank. "Is that what I did? Scream?"

"Far as I know. You think you can walk or do you want me to carry you?"

"I can walk."

Her crisp positiveness irked Shaft. One of those, he thought, withdrawing the hand of assistance he had

extended, reminded once again that the hand was black.

"Okay," he said. "Get up and walk. There's a man upstairs who's going to call the fuzz if you ain't gone in five minutes."

She sat up with a frown. "*Fuzz?* What is fuzz?"

Shaft shrugged. "Fuzz is fuzz, lady. It's the long arm of the law."

"The what?"

This was probably the only broad they ever brought to the basement. Naturally, it was a crazy one.

"Forget it, lady. Just stand up and I'll walk you out of here. You don't want to go to jail for being a public nuisance, do you?"

"No," she said, getting to her feet. "I do not wish to have any business with the police."

Biss-niss with the pa-lease was how the words came out, and then it dawned on Shaft, it finally sunk into his brain, that not everybody on earth was a New Yorker.

"Where you from?"

"Israel," she said, almost in defiance—or so it seemed to Shaft.

Israel. Nobody came from Israel. That was where everybody went for a nineteen-day tour or to live and kick an occasional Ay-rab in the ass. She tried to stand—and wobbled. Shaft grabbed her arm and led her toward the back door.

"You're walking on your ankles, friend," he said. "When'd you eat last?"

"I—I don't remember," she said.

"You didn't eat," Shaft concluded flatly. He looked at her more closely—blotting-paper raincoat, down-at-the-heels shoes.

"You picked a hell of a place to stop for a bagel."

"What?"

"Nothing. If you think you can manage four blocks I'll buy you a hot dog. It's mystery meat, but there's all kinds of vitamins and minerals in the relish, mustard, and sauerkraut. How about it?"

She startled him. "I'll buy you one," she said.

"No, I said *I'll* buy."

"That is not fair."

"I'm a big spender."

She scrutinized him soberly, then nodded her assent. "Very well. You can buy the hot dogs, but I will buy the coffee."

What the hell was happening to broads? He took her out past the two armed guards at the back door—beefy ex-cops who smiled a little when Shaft winked and said, "Friend o' Mistuh Blackburn's." Then he led her east, out of the land of make-believe, toward the reality of Sixth Avenue. He was about to say something to her when the eyes that dug everything, the senses that had been standing chickie since he stole his first candy bar, perceived the shadows and the pattern of them. They were being followed—and by experts, who had put them in the box of one behind on the same side of the street and one ahead about thirty yards on the other side.

Tailed! A down-at-the-heels chick and a black mop-pusher being tailed. Now there was some very interesting shit.

He pulled her into the alcove of a rare book store and pretended to look at the display. A man in a gray plaid Burberry paused thirty feet behind them while another man continued ahead, strolling casually under a black umbrella. Shaft continued on with the girl, pausing at another store ten doors down. This time the pattern was reversed. Gray plaid Burberry passed them and black umbrella lingered back. Very neat. Very professional.

But who the hell were they? They weren't cops. New York cops didn't wear two-hundred-dollar Burberrys and he couldn't think of one who would have been caught dead with an umbrella. So if not cops, then who?

He leaned close to Cara, smiling in warm and friendly flirtation, and pointed in the window at some crap he wasn't even seeing and asked, "You got any reason for being followed?"

Her arm jerked in the firm grip of his hand. She was on the edge of panic.

"Take it easy," he said. "Keep walking, slow and casual. When I tell you to run—run, but hold onto my hand."

Shaft was aware that *he* should be on the run—back to his job and away from this extraneous hocus-pocus. What'd he give a damn if she had trouble? He had twice as much. But it bugged him. Couple of pimps playing games, with this girl—and now with him.

"Don't look behind you," he said. "The man behind us looks just like the guy up there at the bus stop . . . the one with the black umbrella. Same build . . . same age . . . only the guy behind us is wearing a gray plaid coat. Does it ring a bell?"

She did not comprehend. "There are many of them . . . they want my father."

"Well, that ain't what they're gonna get."

The iron gate was open on the narrow service alley that cut between two old buildings.

"Run!" he hissed. Shaft nearly jerked her off her feet as he dashed five steps into the alley and then pulled up flush against the wall. It was the oldest street trick in the world—the gang in ragged flight that was not really flight at all. Shaft had learned it about the time he had learned how to read. He was ready for gray plaid Burberry the moment the man cut into the alley, running hard, hot on the heels of his quarry. Shaft cut him off at the knees with one swift leg-breaking kick and Levi Yadin went down in a wild tangle of flailing arms and slipping feet. He landed on his back ten yards down the alley, the breath slammed out of his lungs, the pain twisting him into a ball of agony. If you're gonna play, learn how to lose—and always go for the whole pot. This was Shaft's game. The cables and coils of his arms bunched like a basket of snakes as he moved swiftly in a crouch to the opposite wall of the alley. His encounter with Black Umbrella was almost casual. Mordecai Tal remembered moving into the alley—vaguely. Even the image was shaken by Shaft's big right hand, a five-fingered trip-hammer, catching him in the soft hollow below the rib cage. The blow stopped Mordecai's heart for five full beats and turned him into a bag of warm cottage cheese. Creamed.

And that was how he fell.

"Let us move," Shaft said. Cara stared with the bloated eyes of a stunned perch. He grabbed her hand

and moved out of the alley. A delivery man was coming in with a handtruck of boxes. He moved Cara away and down the street. Maybe the delivery man was up on his first aid.

There are many of them . . . they want my father.

The girl's words echoed in Shaft's mind as he led a broken course through midtown Manhattan. He knew every street and arcade and almost every building that could be entered one way and exited another. And where the mole people moved underground. A bloodhound shooting speed couldn't have followed. But who wanted to? And what were they after her father for? He had a moment's worry. Jesus, those cats could have been CIA . . . they could have been FBI. Maybe her old man robbed banks or blew up embassies. He glanced at her as he hurried her across Park Avenue toward a subway entrance. Her face was bleak with fatigue. Her hand lay in his own, as trusting as a child's hand.

Screw the CIA and the FBI. They had bad manners, pushing little broads around on rainy days, chasing Shaft down alleys, like muggers. He wanted to go back and break the guy's other leg.

The hand in his tightened a little as he led her into the human river of the rush hour, down and down and down toward the thundering trains, just two people in a swamp of humanity . . . pushed, jostled, and poked. Alone and safe.

The actions of a human being in flight could be reduced to a mathematical formula. It was, Fischer mused, part of the "law of disorder." It was like the

"random walk" theory in physics. Blindfold a child and start him walking away from a lamppost and he would always return to that lamppost, no matter how erratic his path might be. It gave Fischer something to occupy his mind as he clung to a strap in the jammed subway car. He did not waste time trying to analyze the motive of the big Negro or to think about where he was taking Cara Herzel. Neither did he permit himself to think about Mordecai and Levi. On Fischer's team, it was each man for himself. That rule had been stressed time and time again. If a member of the team fell—leave him. Fischer had seen too many good men die because they had gone to the aid of a friend. He smiled slightly to himself. Die? In New York City? Manhattan was not Beirut or Damascus. The *shvartze* was not a gunman from the Arab League. Still, one did not break the habits of a lifetime. Breaking a habit in New York might lead to bending a habit in Baghdad, with fatal results. Fischer dismissed the thought. Mordecai and Levi had floundered, but he would not. He swayed to the rhythm of the train and kept a casual eye on the tip of John Shaft's head at the far end of the car.

"I love your bed, David . . . I just *love* it." Peter Day bounced on it, being careful not to spill his martini on the coverlet or on his suit. Peter Day was by nature a decorator. It was what he wanted to be. Of course, he was grateful that David Alexander had found him a job selling at Blackburn's, but he would have preferred working for Dorothy Draper. One day, the Lord willing, he would save enough money to open a little salon

somewhere in the east Sixties and wallpaper bathrooms in red suede. But in the meantime, he decorated the apartments of friends. He was a bit miffed that David hadn't consulted him when he had redone his apartment. Personally, he thought the bed a real horror.

"I'm glad you like it," Alexander said as he came into the bedroom from the shower, his slim body wrapped in a huge towel. "The posts are what intrigued me. They give one something to hold on to."

Peter Day smiled coyly and sipped his drink.

"What's been going on at the shop since I've been gone?" Alexander asked casually. He could always rely on Peter for a deluge of gossip, some small fraction of which usually proved useful to Morris or himself. He poured a drink from the sterling silver cocktail shaker on the bedstand table and listened with amusement to Peter's perfect imitation of Cherry Culp throwing a temper tantrum. Peter also did Bette, Marlene, and unbelievable Hermione. Otherwise, the little bitch was really a bad imitation paste—of a clever queen.

"She was absolutely *furious* at Mr. Blackburn. It seems he had failed to deliver some sort of jeweled merkin or something and she went off into utter *paroxysms*. . . ."

The stories flowed and weaved about each other. It seemed incredible to Alexander that so much could have taken place during the three days of his absence.

"And then there was that *awful* Jewish girl thing this afternoon," Peter Day concluded. "What on earth gave her the idea I knew where her father was is quite beyond me, but she insisted . . . absolutely *insisted* I knew all about him. At least that's what I *gathered*. She

kept shoving this perfectly banal photograph of this terribly *Hebraic* old man in front of my face, while babbling away at me in Yiddish . . . or *Hebrew* . . . some dreadful language. Maybe it was Japanese."

The feeling that began to creep over Alexander felt as heavy as a vice cop's hand.

"Did she have a name?" he asked quietly.

Peter Day waved a languid hand. "Oh, I *suppose* so. She mentioned something . . . some kikey name like *Fartzel* . . . or perhaps it was *Shartzel* . . . don't ask me."

"What about . . . *Herzel?*"

"Could be, could be . . . ," he replied, doing his imitation of Mr. Kitzel.

Alexander stifled an urge to kick the stupid queen in the balls. The old man's daughter in Morris Blackburn's showroom and this . . . this simpering fairy had let her go. He turned away to hide his anger. Of course, how could Peter have known? Peter was stupid but he needed him—at least for tonight. The little scene in Scottsdale had left him keyed, tense. He needed Peter's delicious tricks to ease the pressure that hammered at his skull.

"Be a luv, Peter . . . run down to Papa Jack's and pick up a jug of chianti. You might get a few cans of anchovies while you're at it."

"Right-o . . . on my way. *Ciao!*"

"*Ciao,* baby."

David sat on the edge of the bed and waited until he heard the door close. Then he picked up the telephone and started to dial Morris's private line. He got as far as PL 9 before replacing the receiver in its cradle. It was quiet in his apartment . . . so still. He could think,

and he had not been thinking correctly. To tell Morris about the girl would be foolish. What would be the point of it? Morris had told him little about Avrim Herzel. He had explained that the man was important . . . a gem dealer and master cutter; the only man on earth who had the skill to recut some of the stolen stones so that they would be undetectable . . . and that was all he had said about him. David Alexander had neither believed nor disbelieved Morris. The ultra secrecy . . . the spiriting of the old man in and out of the salon at odd hours had been understandable. But if the man was such a famous dealer and cutter, why was it that no cutter Alexander had talked to had ever heard the name?

No . . . Morris was keeping something up his sleeve.

"That is your right, Morris," his logic argued. "I have never questioned your actions. You tell me what you want done and I do it. You've never lied to me before, Morris . . . never. Maybe this man is a *special* kind of cutter. I don't know. I trust you, Morris. I really trust you . . . just as you trust me."

His body was bathed in sweat and he pulled the towel away and tossed it into a corner of the room. The girl intrigued him. The old man's daughter. How old would she be? Young? Middle aged? Peter could tell him that. Peter had seen her, talked with her. Where had she gone after leaving the salon? Had she said anything about coming back?

The old man's daughter.

She would know everything. Everything that Morris had not told him about Avrim. She would know all —and she would tell all.

He lay back on the bed and thought about it. He hoped she was young, pretty—and reluctant to tell him anything. He knew ways to make women give up their secrets, simple little ways that started out as pleasure and then skidded into pain.

He stared at the ceiling. His body was on fire. Jesus, he groaned, hurry back, Peter . . . please hurry back.

"At least it's out of the rain," Shaft said. He held the door open for her and she entered the apartment hesitantly, as though afraid of soiling the carpet with her wet shoes.

"It's lovely," she said, standing just inside the door.

Well, it didn't look bad, Shaft had to admit. In fact, it looked downright sunny after a four-block walk in a torrent of rain. Christ, was it raining! The rain slapped against the windows like bucketfuls of BBs. Two degrees colder and the city would be in snow up to its ass. He seemed to remember leaving the kitchen window open and he ran in, through a small flood, and pushed it down. When he had secured the window and returned to the living room, the girl was standing exactly where he had left her.

"Get out of that raincoat before you catch cold." He helped her out of it, and she was as wet under the coat as though she had worn no coat at all. He took her into the bedroom and she stood quietly, impassively, while he rummaged through his drawers for something she could wear. Amy had left one item; the tiniest nightgown in history . . . a wisp of silk as transparent as

crystal. He buried it under a pile of socks and kept fishing. He found an old sweatshirt with the words ATHLETIC DEPT. CCNY stamped across it; a clean but worn pair of warm-up pants; a ski sweater that some long-forgotten broad had brought back from Switzerland with a ski instructor's teeth marks on her inner thigh.

"Maybe you can find something here," he said.

"I think so. Thank you." Her words were indistinct. Her teeth were chattering like a handful of dice. The cold, the black cold of New York had been driven into her very bones.

"Take a hot shower while I fix us something to eat . . . must be something in the cupboard . . . soup, pork and beans . . ."

"Just soup," she said quickly, "will be fine."

He found three cans of condensed soup in different varieties and dumped them together to make a thick mixture of chicken, noodles, tomato, rice, and white beans and had the pot simmering by the time she came into the kitchen, wearing the CCNY sweatshirt and the baggy warm-up pants. Shaft tried to keep his face straight, but it wasn't easy.

"I must look terrible," she said, flushing. She dabbed at her hair, which she had toweled dry and tied back with a handkerchief. Shaft thought she looked lovely. The contradiction of girls in sweatshirts had always turned him on. Usually, they didn't wear the sweatpants.

"You look great. Now sit down and eat it while it's hot."

They ate like gluttons. There were a million ques-

tions Shaft wanted to ask the girl but he didn't ask one of them. He just stowed the soup away.

"How about a cup of coffee?" he asked after the last dollop of old mother Shaft's chicken what-have-you had been scooped out of the pot.

She shook her head. "Perhaps . . . if I could lie down for half an hour. . . ." She was rocking on the chair.

"Sure. Help yourself to the bed."

She stood up but she didn't look as though she could make it out of the kitchen without falling. Shaft put an arm around her and led her to the bed. She was asleep before they reached it, clinging to him with her head pressed into the hollow of his shoulder.

How about that? Right out on her feet. He eased her onto the bed and sat down beside her, resting his back against the headboard. She curled into him, whimpering slightly in her exhaustion. He put a hand on the back of her head and slowly stroked her hair. The rain slashed against the windows but it was warm in the room . . . very warm and cozy with all the soup in his belly and the girl breathing deeply against his side. He felt himself drifting off and he didn't fight it. He was dimly aware that the telephone was ringing . . . ringing . . . ringing . . . but the sound was a million miles away. He made a mental note that he must ask this girl what her name was—and then he was asleep.

7

THE LIGHT BURNED into his brain. It stabbed behind the eyes with a hot, probing wire. He jerked his body forward and squinted into the blinding disc.

"What the hell . . ."

"Do not alarm yourself, Mr. Shaft." The voice was calmly reassuring. The room light was flicked on and there stood Simon Solomon by his bedside, looking like a wet Santa Claus. Another man stood in the doorway holding a large flashlight, and as Shaft rubbed orange circles from his eyeballs, he noticed, with a jolt of anger, that it was Arnold Berkowitz, detective, Seventeenth Precinct.

"What is this?" Shaft snarled.

"We came in," Simon Solomon intoned patiently, "because we were concerned about you."

Came in! What the hell did he have locks for? Why didn't he just put in a revolving door? Jesus! People just walked in off the fucking street like he was running a fucking ten-cent pay toilet. The vibrations of his anger were so intense that Arnold Berkowitz, who was well aware of the shortness of Shaft's

temper, took a step backward, gripping the flashlight like a club.

Shaft glanced at the clock on the table by the bed. It was two in the morning and just for a moment he wasn't quite sure where he was or who was lying next to him. He remembered waking up in the mothering cold, finding some blankets, turning off the lights, and then getting back on the bed beside the girl in the sweatshirt.

He glowered at Berkowitz standing uninvited in *his* bedroom, dripping water on *his* floor. The man looked obscene with his long, scraggly curls and rain-sodden black cowboy hat.

"Why don't you get a haircut?" Shaft snarled. "You look like a broad from the Bronx who used to give the best head in the Village."

"Prick," Berkowitz said.

"That's what she wanted. But I don't need a blow job now, so get the fuck out of here."

"Now, now, Mr. Shaft," Simon Solomon said, laying on the balm. The man's language no longer distressed him: he took it for granted as being part of his personality. "If you don't mind leaving your . . . ah . . . your friend for a moment, perhaps we could discuss one or two things in the other room. Yes?"

Shaft's instinct was to kick the two of them out into the storm, but, what the hell . . . it *was* Simon Solomon, the bearer of riches—maybe.

"Okay." He slipped out of the blankets, fully dressed except for his shoes. The girl beside him stirred, raising up on her elbows to stare at the elderly Hassid in wonder and surprise.

"*Shalom alaichem,*" she said.

"*Alaichem shalom,*" Solomon replied. Truly, he thought, the world is full of mysterious things. To find a girl in John Shaft's bed was not surprising, but a Hebrew-speaking girl? . . . in a gray sweatshirt? Solomon nodded and left the room pushing Arnold Berkowitz ahead of him. The detective's interest in the girl was more basic. He had been staring at her, speculating as to whether or not she was naked below the sweatshirt. The blanket covered her and he never did find out. He assumed that she was, and the thought irritated him.

Shaft closed the bedroom door, lit a cigaret, and cold-stared the two men in his living room. "Well?"

Solomon shrugged and made a vague gesture with his hands. "I thought you might have been dead. Many things have been happening and I was unable to get you on the telephone."

Shaft jerked a finger toward Berkowitz. "So how does he figure into it?"

"Detective Berkowitz got a search warrant. He is also an expert with keys. We expected to find a corpse here."

"I bet he's disappointed."

Berkowitz said nothing. He'd have to lie to deny it.

"Any blame for the intrusion rests on my shoulders, Mr. Shaft," Solomon went on. "But I'm sure you can understand my concern. I thought I had made myself clear . . . that I would telephone you every evening. When I rang . . . and rang and *rang*

and there was no answer . . ." He let his voice trail off, his expressive hands completing the explanation.

"Yeah," Shaft muttered. "Well, I been busy."

A half-smile graced Solomon's face. It was hidden deep in beard curls. "Yes. So I can see."

Shaft ignored it. "I didn't answer the phone because . . . *so far* . . . I've got nothing to tell you. Not one damn thing that would amount to anything." He kept looking at Berkowitz. The man's presence in the room annoyed him. "Does he belong to you?"

"Police Detective Berkowitz is involved with our problems, Mr. Shaft."

"He's not involved in *my* problems!" The statement was final.

Simon Solomon turned his head slightly and looked at Berkowitz.

"Okay," Berkowitz said, "I'll go. I'll be right outside in the hall, Mr. Solomon . . . in case."

"Don't write any of that spic shit on the walls while you're out there," Shaft said. "This ain't the IRT."

The door slammed on Berkowitz's departure and Simon Solomon sank into a chair with a deep sigh.

"I sometimes questioned our decision to hire you, Mr. Shaft. I must admit that I was one of the doubters. Perhaps not wiser heads prevailed, but heads more in tune with the violence of our times. I was assured that you would be able to cope with any situation that might come up . . . that you could fight violence with violence. I believe them now. I have seen your angers."

"You bawling me out again?"

"No . . . a *potch in toches* I am not giving you. You are a little too big for that."

"You come here for a progress report?"

"I come here to tell *you* what is happening . . . and to find out what you are doing—if anything. One of the most beloved of our kind, the dealer Leopold Fishbein, is dead in Arizona. Someone put a bullet in his head. He died like a dog. He died like the others. That makes six dead men, Mr. Shaft. *Six!*"

Shaft lit another cigaret. "That's a long way from Blackburn's basement. And that's where we agreed I should start looking."

Simon Solomon stared sadly into the shadows of the room. He looked sunk in weariness. A very old man in a damp raincoat at two o'clock in the morning. "I expected nothing . . . and everything. The reason you are there sits on my heart, *chas v'cholileh!* Something is not right . . . something is not kosher with Morris Blackburn. I know this as I know it is *chlopping* in the street out there."

Shaft paced the room, flicking cigaret ash on the floor with total innocence. Solomon watched him the way a child watches a panther at the zoo. Finally, Shaft stopped roaming and stood in front of the old man.

"How far are you prepared to go? I mean . . . can we run a few risks?"

"We? Or you?"

"Me . . . but I'm not going to get hung up on a short stick. Not for you . . . not for anybody. If I take a tumble, I'm not going to the wall with my lips sealed."

Solomon lowered his head and stared at his folded hands. To men who knew him well, this was the sign that he was contemplating the merits of a deal. "What exactly did you have in mind?"

Shaft took a deep breath. "I want to blow down a few doors in Blackburn's . . . I want to see what the hell he has upstairs—*and* down. That goddamn building is a maze—and there are too many places I just can't get close to. I couldn't ingratiate myself with Blackburn in a thousand years. I'm just a nigger with a broom!"

"Blow down a few doors?" He eyed Shaft speculatively. "Are we talking in the figurative sense of the word, Mr. Shaft . . . or the literal?"

"By blow I mean *blow.* A dab of plastic in the hinges. Blow as in B-A-N-G."

Solomon's face was ashen. "You are asking a lot."

Shaft slapped another Kent out of the pack and stuck it in the corner of his mouth without bothering to light it. He was so keyed up he could have swallowed it like an aspirin.

"There's a lot at stake. Or is there? I mean, I only have your word for it. Maybe six dead men don't mean buttons in your business. Maybe that's an average month's write-off!"

"How dare you!" Simon Solomon half rose from his chair. His face had turned the color of claret. "How dare you say a thing like that!"

"Okay . . . you've made your point. Sit down. If you think something stinks at Blackburn's, I'm not going to find out what it is down in the boiler room. Now a friend of mine"—he thought of the zonk sound the bat made on Willie's head—"has volunteered me a pass through the building up to them iron doors but not beyond, and if there's so much on the line, a little risk is warranted. Right?"

Simon Solomon sat back in the chair and scanned

Shaft's face for what seemed like ten minutes. He finally nodded his head at about the same time his complexion went back to its normal shade. "You are right. Of course you are right. Yes. I can understand why risks must be taken."

Shaft lit the cigaret, taking his time, inhaling smoke to his toes.

"Okay . . . let's not speak with forked tongue, Great White Father. Maybe I won't have to bust up a damn thing, but if I have to, I will. I want to get into every nook and cranny. I'll photograph everything and anything that has to do with diamonds. I'll take Minox shots of Blackburn's papers, books, invoices . . . the works. If I can crack any strongboxes or safes, I'll do that, too, and take pictures of the stones. This . . . *caper* might blow up in my face. I might start the evening at Blackburn's and end it in the Tombs. All I want to know from you is—will somebody come down with a can opener and get me out?"

Solomon pursed his lips and tapped his fingers on the arms of the chair. "The risk a man runs should be directly proportional to the rewards at stake. If you are successful, your reward will be great. But if you are not successful . . ."

Shaft's smile was like the grin of a wolf. "I stay out in the cold. Right?"

"That is correct, Mr. Shaft. I would have to disown you. Not just me—but the diamond industry."

Shaft studied the old man through a plume of cigaret smoke. Five hundred thousand dollars wasn't a sack of bat guano. It was five hundred thousand pieces of long green. A man should be willing to break his ass for

that kind of money. A man should be willing to jump off a bridge and not expect a safety net to be under it.

"Then you're out of it. It's my show. But to pull it off, I'll need backing . . . a little *financial* backing."

"How much would you require?"

"Say . . . fifty thousand dollars."

Simon Solomon was not beyond further shock. "Such *chutzpah!* You can't do it for less?"

"Mr. Solomon," said Shaft patiently, "you're a million miles from Delancey Street. Let's not haggle about this. If I could do it for less, I would have asked for less."

Solomon brooded about it, his eyes on the tall black man. Fifty thousand dollars was not a fantastic sum in Simon Solomon's world. He had paid many times that amount, in cash, for a few milk-white pieces of unpolished, uncut stones, but he had known what he was buying. This proposal was beyond his ability to evaluate. He had to trust the black man. And could he do that? He rocked back and forth in an agony of indecision. To trust or not to trust?

Rain thudded down and the black cold seeped through the walls. Simon Solomon shuddered. He felt, for a second, the chill of the grave where six men . . . six old friends . . . were lying. The horror that pervaded his world must end. If John Shaft could contribute to the eradication of that horror, then no price was too large. Trust the man? What choice did he have?

"A deal. How do you want the money . . . and when?"

"Small bills—tomorrow, if possible," Shaft said. He felt better all of a sudden. He felt that he was starting to move.

After Solomon had left, Shaft paced the living room, too keyed up to sleep, his mind clicking off the things that had to be done—not the least of which was informing Willie that he was buying his precious caper . . . his weird, wacky, but oh so simple caper . . . for fifty cents on the dollar, which would also cover his medical bills. Then there was the plastic to get hold of; and sticky cotton batting to keep the noise down to a small pop. He would have to work fast once he was in there . . . two hours . . . on the button, Willie had said. Two hours. Well, he could do it in that time. Do it and get out of there. He might have nothing to show for it except a lot of pictures that wouldn't mean a damn thing to anyone. He might be pissing Solomon's money right down the drain. That was the number one gamble.

"Like hell it is!" He stopped pacing and glared at his image in the mirror above the couch. The number one problem was his own black ass. What would they give him for pulling a job like that? Ten years? Twenty? They'd put him in a hole and stamp it closed with buffalo shit. He'd get a hundred years to life.

"You cannot sleep?" Her voice was tiny. The whisper of a mouse. Shaft stared at her, and she was certainly worth looking at, even in baggy gray cotton. The handkerchief had come loose, and her hair hung down past her shoulders, thick and black, blacker than his own. He noticed the clean lines of her face, the smooth forehead, and the deep-set almond eyes. A very lovely thing to see in the small hours of a cold, wet morning.

"I've got some things on my mind," he said.

"Would you like me to fix you some coffee?"

"Sure. I'd like that fine."

He followed her into the kitchen, and she was truly

amazing. He sat at the little table and watched her in awe. He didn't have to tell her anything. She found things by instinct—the kettle . . . the cups . . . the beans to grind, the Chemex, and the filters. The beans from McNulty's Tea & Coffee Shop over on Christopher were French-roast Colombian, and gleamed oily brown-black against her pale hands as she filled the grinder. They were silent during the ritual of leaching the coffee, and the room was filled with its perfume when she poured the cup for him.

"I haven't forgotten about you," he said as she brought the steaming coffee to the table. "You've got problems and you can lay 'em on me. A lot of people do."

She eyed him over the rim of her cup. "The Hassidim who were here. Are you Jewish?"

He nearly choked to death on his first swig of coffee.

"Lady," he gasped, "I'm not even a Baptist!"

She was nonplussed. "I only wondered. There are many Africans who are Jewish."

African! The girl was really too much. "My mother was a cannibal queen—but she wasn't Jewish."

She looked hurt. "You are making fun."

He reached over and touched her hand. "You're right. I'm making fun. The old man is a client of mine. I'm a private detective. Do you know what that is—a private detective?"

"Yes," she said solemnly.

"Well, I get all kinds of clients. Jews with problems . . . Puerto Ricans with problems . . . Eskimos with problems . . . even very pretty Israeli girls with problems."

She did not react to the compliment. Her expression was locked in sadness. "Could you find my father?"

"Maybe—but we have a very good police department that's better equipped for that sort of thing than I am."

"I cannot go to the police." Her tone was flat, final.

"Why not?"

"If the police found him, they would turn him over to the Israeli Consul and he would be flown back to Jerusalem. I do not want that to happen until I have talked with him. I must know what they want him for. I must know why he . . . ran away from his homeland."

"And the men in the alley?"

"Security agents . . . sent to take him back."

Shaft whistled softly through his teeth. Israeli CIA. Her old man must be important to them, and they sure as hell meant to get him. When he had grabbed Black Umbrella, he had felt the steel slab of a pistol under his coat.

"I'll do what I can, but it'll have to wait. I'm sorry, but I'm in a big case—too big to stop."

"I understand."

"In the meantime, you can stay here if you want. You might feel safer."

"Thank you," she said. "The apartment is small, but we will manage."

He stared at her. She was really something else. "What I meant was . . . *you* can stay here. A buddy of mine has a pad on Grove Street. I can move in with him for a couple of days. You know, until I can sort of get your problem straight in my mind."

She shook her head emphatically. "That would be inconvenient for you. No. We will manage."

"Yeah? I don't think you'd find me a very good roommate. In fact, I'd make a lousy roommate. I got some real weird habits."

"We will talk about it in the morning," she said evenly. "Finish your coffee before it gets cold."

He half expected her to tell him to brush his teeth and wash behind his ears. He had the feeling that he was running up against a chick who had a great deal of force. Her slim exterior concealed a core of iron. A very strong-willed woman who was used to taking over. A manager. Well, to hell with that jive. There was already Amy uptown, running his sex life so forcefully he never got to make the first pass, and it was bugging him. He wasn't about to be managed by anyone. He made up his mind to that even as he drank his coffee before it got cold.

Ben Fischer allowed himself the luxury of a whiskey and soda in the No Name. It was three o'clock in the morning and the place was still two deep at the bar. Fischer seemed to blend in with the crowd. That was part of his talent. Had he gone into a workingmen's tavern, he would have looked like a hard-hat Polack having a quick shot and a beer before heading out to the job. If a steelworker had talked to him, he could have spoken his language, using the argot of the trade. Now, in the No Name, he could have been taken for a Slavic poet or a fight promoter, a documentary filmmaker or a Village hustler. No one paid him the slightest attention. He simply fit in.

Fischer paid for his drink at the bar and took it to a small table off to the side where a sleeping drunk had one chair. Fischer paid no attention to the drunk and the drunk paid no attention to Fischer.

Patterns, Fischer was thinking, there were always patterns to every case. Sometimes they were difficult to see, but eventually, if one were patient enough, they emerged. What had brought the pattern in this case into focus was the arrival of the Hassidim. The Hassidim might be pious, but they took no vows of poverty. To Fischer, Hassidim spelled diamonds. They had their fingers on the pulse of the trade. They were part of the New York–Amsterdam–Johannesburg axis. They were the Jesuits of the international gem business. And now they were in the picture. The Negro had left Morris Blackburn's with Cara Herzel, and the two Hassidim had come to see her at the Negro's apartment across the street. There was more than a coincidence involved; Fischer was positive of that. The Hassidim knew where Avrim was hiding . . . perhaps the Negro knew also. He had seen the Negro take care of Mordecai and Levi with an ease that could only have come from long practice. The man was obviously a bodyguard of some kind—a professional. Employed by whom? The Hassidim or Morris Blackburn? One or the other. The time had come to stop drifting. If they did not move quickly, Avrim Herzel might be spirited away from them, to South Africa . . . the Netherlands . . . anyplace where the diamond trust could keep him and his secret safely to themselves.

Yes. A pattern was there. The Hassidim . . . the Negro . . . Morris Blackburn. Three loose strings

that must inevitably cross—and when they did, Fischer would be ready to tie them all into a knot.

"Pressure and heat, Moishe. That is all they could think of. They reasoned that to do this *un*natural thing, they must first do the natural . . . they must duplicate the force of nature." Avrim Herzel smiled at such quaint foolishness. It was dark in the room except for the thin, geometric lines of the laser beams.

"Even General Electric could think of no other practical way. So it was heat . . . nine thousand degrees of heat . . . and pressure . . . three million pounds to the square inch. And the result? a Koh-i-noor? A Jonker? A three-thousand-carat Cullinan? No, Moishele . . . no. It was nothing but grains of diamond . . . nothing but *dust.* One cannot imitate nature unless one is prepared to add that most essential of nature's ingredients into the pot—*time.*"

Time. A vein pulsed in Morris Blackburn's forehead. The miracle of this old man was in that word. Avrim Herzel speeded up time. He also held it back so that each minute could be savored, every delicious second enjoyed. The brilliant white threads of the laser beams would weave a magic raiment . . . a cloak to envelop Blackburn in a luxury that would make him the envy of kings. No more wasting his life in the fret and panic of commerce. No more sweating through the agonies of books that failed to balance . . . of bills that could not be paid . . . of statements that were ignored. He could control an industry by the mere flick of a switch. He could ride to the top of the world on light beams!

"No, Moishe," the old man went on, "man is superior in some ways to nature herself. Man can think . . . he can improvise. Nature could not make the atomic bomb . . . she could supply only the atom. She could forge diamonds in the flue pipes of volcanoes, but no other way. Nature is like a woman with a magnificent body. Her body exists, but she is ignorant of its structure. Man, on the other hand, is a tiny, ugly doctor . . . probing . . . cutting . . . digging into the woman's flesh to see what makes it exist."

Oh, God in Heaven, Morris Blackburn was thinking, if only this old fool would shut up. The man talked in parables. He talked in riddles. His mind wandered like a goat in a pasture. Sprinkled in among the anecdotes, observations, remembrances of things long past, and even feeble jokes, was the secret of his process. It came out in minute fragments, uttered in English . . . Yiddish . . . German and Hebrew. Morris had taken the precaution of bringing a portable tape recorder with him during all of their sessions so as to study the complexities of the formula at his leisure and transcribe them to a notebook. The riddle of the ages had been solved. The dreams of a million alchemists had been fulfilled.

"Two minutes and fifteen point seven seconds—exactly." There was excitement in the old man's voice as a timer clicked. The lasers shut off and the room lights flicked on.

"That was one of the most difficult things to determine, Moishe. Too much time, even a fraction of a second, and I had stones, yes, beautiful stones, but ten times more fragile than glass. A whisper . . . a pencil

dropping from a table would shatter them. The molecular structure was in the proper arrangement, but unstable. Two minutes . . . fifteen point seven seconds . . . the ruby maser deflector system on number one laser set at thirty-six degrees . . . and *then* you have it."

Morris Blackburn stared at the center of the long worktable that took up one wall of the subbasement workshop. A mold of wet sand and red clay, looking very much like a child's castle built on a beach, rested on a turntable of stainless steel. The table still revolved at a precise 7⅛ revolutions per minute. Blackburn took a hesitant step toward it.

"Go to it, Moishele," Avrim Herzel said. "Play in the sand. Enjoy . . . enjoy."

Blackburn was trembling. He knew how Pizarro must have felt when he first suspected the riches of the Incas . . . when he first saw the rooms of gold, the heaps of emerald. He reached out for the mold and thrust his hands into the sticky mixture, crumbling it, sifting it through his damp fingers. He encountered clumps of matter . . . hard, crystalline . . . which he plunged into a tray of water. The clay and sand drifted off to reveal crystals of depth and hidden fire. He plucked one from the tray, and water ran from it as though the stone had been coated with wax.

"Diamond," he breathed.

"Of course diamond," Herzel cried triumphantly. "What did you expect? Marbles?"

"Diamond," Blackburn whispered. He dumped all of the sandy clay into the water and plucked stones out of the muddy residue. When he was finished, there was a tiny pile of rough diamonds on the worktable.

"What would you say, Moishe? Fifty carats?"

"Yes, fifty . . . maybe sixty." He found it difficult to speak.

"Top gem quality. No industrials. Only the finest. Cut out to say . . . three, four carats a stone, but there is no limit to size. It depends on the amount of borazon-carbon mixture you use. In time, with more equipment, you could make a stone of a hundred carats. No . . . why only a hundred, Moishele? A *thousand!*"

There was a roaring in Blackburn's ears. He felt giddy. It was real and yet not real. A thousand carats . . . two thousand . . . made to order. He could envision it . . . the Blackburn Diamond . . . the world's most precious gem . . . the largest diamond in existence. Perhaps he would donate it to a grateful charity. The Blackburn gift . . . a million-dollar donation . . . his name on everyone's lips. And also a great tax write-off.

"You are pale, Moishe," Herzel said kindly. "Perhaps we should go home now."

"You have nothing more to tell me about this?"

Herzel shook his head. "Nothing. You know it all."

It ceased to be rain as Blackburn turned his Rolls-Royce off Fifty-seventh Street into Sutton Place. A solid black curtain swept over him, and he was afraid for a moment that he would lose control of the car. He pulled over to the curb and waited for the cloudburst to pass. He was too tired and tense to struggle with the weather.

"Are we home, Moishe?" The old man's voice was a gentle sigh, barely heard over the thunder of the rain.

"No. Not yet."

"It is warm in the car, like being in one's own bed."

Herzel stretched out a hand and ran his fingers over the leather seat. "A very nice car, Moishe."

Blackburn did not feel it incumbent to make conversation. He stared fixedly ahead. Some time tomorrow Herzel must die. It must be done quickly and well. David would know how to do it. He would tell David that Herzel was becoming difficult. That he had latched onto the fact that the stones he was recutting were stolen . . . that he wanted more money . . . a great deal more money. David would understand the need for the old man's execution. David would know how to do it.

"We will tell them first thing in the morning, Moishe."

"What?" Blackburn turned his head and looked at Herzel. "Who is *them?*"

"The world. We will tell the world. I thought a simple meeting with some journalists. I would explain what I have done . . . show them samples . . . tell them that you are the custodian of the process. I want that to be very clear. I want the world to know that you and you alone have control over the production of the gems."

Blackburn felt that he was dying. Reality was slipping away from him. The car . . . the rain . . . the babbling old man . . . he was drifting off . . . floating far, far above everything. He struggled to return, forced himself to come back to life and sanity.

"It is . . . not the . . . right time. We say . . . nothing." The words sounded alien. It couldn't be real. But it was. Herzel was in sharp focus now, the hammering of the rain on the hood of the car not part of a dream.

"Nothing!" he shouted over the drumming noise. "Not now . . . not yet."

"Yes, Moishele, *now.* My work here is done. I must go home. I must go back."

Anger and terror exploded in Blackburn's brain like a grenade. He turned on the seat and reached for the old man's throat. He clutched it in the vise of his hands and wrung the scrawny neck the way a goose is throttled in the slaughterer's yard. He shook and shook Avrim Herzel long after the man had died, until the rage and fear had left him, until the thunder was gone from his brain and he could hear only the patter of the rain.

The river forms in gentle lakes high in green mountains and then flows south to meet the tidal bore of the gray Atlantic. The river scours the flanks of Manhattan Island and receives the torrent of a thousand drains. A paper cup tossed into the river at Fort Tryon bobs in the current off Richmond. Some flotsam from Pier 86 wallows in the mudflats of Gravesend Bay. In the brown torrent of the rain-fat river, a man turned and twisted like a ragged kite. He drifted where the river took him, rising and falling with the swell. He was no longer Avrim Herzel, he was nothing but one tiny particle of the residue of a great city moving toward the clean, black depths of a great sea.

8

THE CARLOADS OF BLACK MEN move through the quiet of midnight streets. At Park Avenue and Sixty-fifth Street, the lead car pulls over to the curb in front of a branch of the Chemical Bank. Two men get out and move quickly across the sidewalk to the imposing bronze doors. The cavalcade moves on, down Fifth Avenue to Sixty-third Street, where two more men are let out in front of Carson Scott & Co., Fine Silversmiths. The cars continue west on Sixty-third to Madison Avenue to park in a white zone. The balance of the gang, six in number, pile out of the cars and move into the shadows of the small but elegant structure that houses the Wilkerson Publishing Company.

The gang is one of many. On Park, Madison, Fifth . . . on Eighth Avenue, on Wall Street and Chambers, Fulton and lower Broadway, the black gangs move. They travel in private cars, in small buses and vans, in trucks and converted campers. They have the key to the city and the city's trust.

A black man stands before a bank vault in the early hours of the morning. A beat patrolman sees him and

taps on the front window with his nightstick. The black man turns and raises a hand in greeting. It is a ritual that both men have been following for years. The black man is in the bank because banks like their floors to be shiny and their windows clean. The black man moves behind the counters and in the open space in front of the vault pushing an electric polishing machine. He is a worker and he is bonded. No one expects the black man to blow the vault open. Such men do not commit crimes. Statistics show that black men commit more crimes than white men, but the black man's crimes are the crimes of poverty . . . the crimes of the ghetto. A black man hurls a brick through a pawnshop window. He lays a sock full of wet sand over a drunk dude's head in the darkness of Central Park. He does not blow safes. He does not try to corner the salad oil market. There are no black men living in Brazil with $500,000 of their firm's money. The cop on the beat knows this, and so he just taps a greeting on the bank window and the black man waves at him with a clear conscience. There is no nitro in his workbasket, only a half-gallon can of liquid wax.

He may have been Jackson Bean's nigger Willie in the daytime, but three nights a week he was Willie Scott, part of Joe Mathews' team, one of ten men working Fifth Avenue between Fifty-third and Sixty-second Streets. Willie did not like moonlighting but he needed the money. He had always done the floors at Blackburn's with a man by the name of Lonnie. Lonnie had no interest in anything except baseball statistics. As he

pushed his twin-brush waxer over the tiled floors of the upstairs workrooms, he would mumble the batting averages of the National League, repeating the figures like a litany. Willie had pushed his waxer, or wielded his squeegie, and thought of other things.

"You ain't goin' to hurt Lonnie, are you?" Willie asked, his head still reverberating from the casual violence of this strange man who was one of the few in the world who terrorized Willie with a glance. Shaft waited until they had crossed Fifty-sixth Street against the traffic stream before answering.

"Hell, no."

"On account of I'm kinda fond of Lonnie. He ain't really bright, but he's a good dude."

"Hell, man . . . *you* was the one had the idea to give him one upside the head."

Willie nodded sadly. "Sure . . . sure I was. But the way I hits and the way you hits is two different things. I don't want Lonnie to be done an injury."

"Don't worry about it. I won't hit Lonnie any harder than I'll hit you. I'll just put the cat to sleep for a minute. Just long enough to get him into a closet before he comes to and sees my face." Willie's head hurt at the thought. He didn't think Shaft's promises about painless assault and battery were worth a shit.

They were hurrying back to their respective jobs after having spent the better part of their lunch break on the Fifth Avenue bus going to Forty-sixth Street and back. Shaft had left Willie at a lunch stand while he had gone up to Simon Solomon's cubbyhole of an office to pick up the money. Now Willie held a brown manila envelope in his hand with fifty thousand dollars in it and

he was clutching it, the knuckles on his brown hands turning as white as eggshells in the fierce grip.

Fifty grand. His mind whirled like a pinball machine.

"You have to hit me. I can see that. Only thing I don't get is when do you do it. I mean . . . if you hit me first off . . ." His voice trailed away, mirroring his doubts about the whole thing. Shaft stopped with a sigh and faced the little man.

"One more time, Willie, and that's all. I'm gonna take the money back. . . ." Willie went pale. His grip tightened. "I'm blowing the big dream for you—but you ain't doing bad."

"No, no . . . not bad."

"And you're clean. You and Lonnie get a couple lumps and spend two hours in a broom closet. They'll find the place knocked but they won't find a damn thing missing. They won't know what the job was all about or even think you had anything to do with it. So get off my ass. Go count your money."

"It's that . . . *not a damn thing missing* that I worry about," he said craftily. "There might be half a million dollars missing for all I know. You might clear the place out and every cop in the state's goin' to grill me and Lonnie like a couple of pork chops. They're goin' to find my money even if I sink it in the river in a box."

Shaft gave Willie his most sincere look. "Don't you trust me?"

Sure, he trusted Shaft. He also believed in the tooth fairy and that Cadillacs were made of green cheese.

Willie hugged the envelope. "Yeah, I trust you," he said, "I was just wonderin' is all."

"Well, if it'll make you feel easier, I'm not going to hit you until I'm half *out* of the place. I need you, Willie. I want you right beside me every step of the way. I don't want to trip any of those special alarms."

Willie scrutinized Shaft's face. He was trying to penetrate the mask. He suspected there were more twists and turns in the mind behind it than in the Pennsylvania Turnpike.

"I just don't get what you're lookin' for. Fifty thousand dollars and you're not goin' to steal a goddamn thing. I can't figure it."

"Don't try, Willie. Don't try. It's a losing game."

David Alexander didn't like it. The more he thought about it, the deeper his conviction became. But what? It had started that morning when Morris had come in later than usual. There had been many matters to discuss, not the least of which was his cut from the sale of Max Lishkin's pretty samples to a certain party in Venezuela. The sum that Morris had offered had been frog's eggs at caviar time.

"It's not as much as you expected, David . . . but bear with me for a little while. I've been under an enormous strain . . . financial, you understand . . . so many things . . . this and that . . . be patient, David. It's like any business . . . it takes time for the profits to amount to anything. But when they do. . . ."

And then he had smiled. The Morris Blackburn smile. The smile that melted hearts, parted slender legs, and opened checkbooks.

"I trust you, Morris."

"That's my boy, David. I couldn't love you more if you were my own son. We'll both be on top of the world, David . . . very soon. Very, very soon."

And then, in parting, almost as though it were of no consequence. . . .

"Herzel has left us, David."

"Left us?"

"Yes. He . . . he was proving tiresome—and rather difficult. He was a fine cutter, one of the best, but his demands were becoming exorbitant—an exorbitancy, by the way, that is reflected in the paltriness of the sum you just received. I kicked the old crook out. There are other cutters. Or, for that matter, other ways."

"But couldn't he cause trouble?"

"No . . . no . . . I doubt that very much. No, he wouldn't do a thing like that. He'd have as much to lose as I."

"Perhaps you're right."

"Of course I'm right, David. Trust me."

"No," David Alexander groaned, placing the palms of both hands against his forehead. He must have been insane to stand and listen to such drivel without screaming *Liar . . . Liar.*

But how did he know Morris had been lying? How could he be certain?

I trust you, Morris.

He had always trusted him because Morris loved him . . . and yet, lately . . . he sensed a change. Morris was only mouthing words when he said he loved him like a father. Things were different. David felt the change the way a deep-water sailor feels the wind shift even before the breath of it has touched his cheek.

He picked up the interoffice phone.

"Yes, David?"

"One little thing, Morris. I was just wondering how Herzel's daughter will take this. Aren't you afraid she might create a scene . . . rather like the tantrum she threw yesterday afternoon?"

The silence was so absolute that for a moment Alexander thought the line had gone dead. Then Morris's voice came over in a harsh whisper.

"What are you talking about, David?"

"Oh, I thought you knew," Alexander replied blandly. "It seems that Herzel's daughter came here looking for her father. She created quite a scene when Peter told her he didn't know the gentleman. She was quite insistent. . . ."

Again the silence. Then: "Send Peter up to my office . . . right away."

Click.

So there was more than met the eye. Morris had been shaken.

"Peter!"

Peter Day walked toward Alexander's glass and walnut cubicle of an office, a faintly seductive half-smile on his face.

"Yes, David? Did you want me?" The broad insinuation. He was about as seductive as a two-dollar whore, and the crudeness irritated Alexander. He forced a smile. "Mr. Blackburn would like to see you, Peter. Something about that girl who fainted."

Peter Day looked momentarily dismayed. "She wasn't *somebody*, was she?"

"No, Peter . . . but Morris is a bit . . . well, not

himself today. I don't know why, but I'd be very casual about the whole thing if I were you. Just tell him the girl left of her own accord—but said she would come back."

"Come back? But she never—"

"Just do as I say, Peter. Trust me to know what's best with Mr. Blackburn."

"Oh, you do . . . you do," Peter Day sighed.

Alexander watched Peter Day move toward the elevator. Peter's account of the incident had been sketchy. Helmut had taken the girl out toward the rear exit. Peter hadn't known.

He got up from behind the desk and strolled casually out to the street. Helmut gave him the vaguest salute. The old crud probably wore leather underwear. Alexander nodded affably, pausing to light a cigaret.

"How are you this morning, Helmut?"

"Fine, Mr. Alexander. Just fine. A nice day after the rain, yes?"

"Yes. A delicious day." He savored the crisp, cold wind, the bluest blue of any sky anywhere. "Tell me, Helmut . . . that girl yesterday afternoon . . ."

Shaft was in a hurry to leave. The day had been one endless drag, the clock moving with leaden strokes. He had spent most of it cleaning toilets and urinals, and there had been at least a dozen times when he had felt like throwing in the sponge and the Comet cleanser and flying into the brilliant November streets like an uncaged hawk. But he had stayed, doing what he was paid to do, uncomplaining, at least outwardly. He hadn't scrubbed down a public crapper since the army and

didn't think he ever would. He discovered that women, those housekeepers of the world, were disgustingly sloppy in the privacy of the public can. Powder and mascara shit all over the place. If they dropped something like a dirty towel, they left it. And how could anybody who had to squat to piss miss the bowl? But, goddamn, they did that, too. He was righteously indignant and would have left—except. There was the play he had to make. And, that came first. Nothing must interfere. Then Elvon could have his mop back, the poor dumb fuck.

Just stick it out. Clean it all and stick it out. The day dragged on.

The last person Shaft wanted to run into was David Alexander, but there he was, waiting for him in the corridor outside the locker room.

"Can I have a word with you, John?" A shifty nigger. Smart.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Alexander." Up your faggot ass.

"Not here. Perhaps we could have a little drink together?" Probably cheap wine will untie his tongue.

"Well . . . I dunno. . . ." Oh-oh, no time for blow jobs.

"I won't take no for an answer, John." This shit needs training.

Well . . . any other time and this queen would find his teeth coming out both ears. . . .

They went into a small bar on Sixth Avenue, a rough trade clearinghouse where Alexander and Shaft were not at all an incongruous couple. If David Alexander was ordering dark meat for his Thanksgiving gobbler, it was his menu. They found a table about the

size of a stain on the carpeting and Alexander ordered a margarita. Shaft couldn't lie to his stomach—he ordered Scotch.

"I've been watching you, John. I've really had my eye on you. . . ."

Shaft leaned back, sipped his Scotch. After the hungry eye comes the hot hand. He only half heard what Alexander was saying; his thoughts were elsewhere. He had to get film for the Minox . . . pick up the plastic from a freak who made bombs in his mother's kitchen in the Bronx . . . and do a few other assorted things before meeting Willie at the side door of Blackburn's at twelve thirty. He couldn't afford to insult Alexander, but he didn't have time to fuck around playing kneesie with him.

"I can also tell you're a man one can rely upon," Alexander purred. "The way you handled that distressing little episode yesterday, as an example."

Shaft looked blank.

"You know," Alexander went on, "the girl who fainted."

"Oh . . . yeah."

"Helmut told me about it."

"Oh?" What was all this shit? Shaft drained his drink.

"Where did you take her, John?"

"Take her? Out the back door."

Alexander toyed with his drink for a moment, running one slim finger around the rim of the glass. "Of course . . . out the back door. Helmut gave you five dollars to pay for a taxi. Did you put her in a taxi, John?"

"Sure. Yeah, sure I put her in a taxi. She didn't have no money so I gave her the five."

"Where did you get the taxi?"

"Get it? I dunno . . . on the street."

"On Fifth Avenue?"

"Sure."

"Helmut saw you and the girl walking down Fifty-sixth."

What the hell was this all about? "Oh, yeah . . . it was raining. I couldn't get a cab to stop, so I walked her over to Sixth."

"And you put her in a taxi there?"

"Yeah," he pictured David Alexander's head packed with gelignite in each ear, a fuse burning up his nose.

"And where did she go?"

Shaft made an exaggerated shrug. "I dunno."

"She didn't tell you where she lived?"

"No."

"Did she tell you her name?"

"Not that I know of."

"She never mentioned the name *Herzel?*"

"Not to me."

"Would you recall the number of the taxi?"

Shaft clutched his shot glass tightly. Alexander was an amateur, and Shaft hated amateurs in a pro's game. "I wouldn't remember no number."

"How about the driver's face? Was he young? Old? What color hair did he have?"

"He was a big man—with a red beard," Shaft said, keeping his voice under control.

Alexander smiled tightly, a mere pulling back of

the lips. "I must sound awfully pushy, but I want to find that girl . . . for personal reasons. It's worth, say, a hundred dollars to me. If we could find the driver, he might remember where he took her."

"He might."

"And then I could trace her. It really is important to me."

"I believe it."

"Do you think you could find him? These cab drivers all work the same areas each day. . . ."

"I don't see how. Lot of cabs out there."

"I'd like to give you half the money now . . . just to show my good faith."

Alexander reached for his wallet, but Shaft was already on his feet.

"That's okay, Mr. Alexander. I trust you. Yes, sir, I'll do my best. I'll look for that driver tomorrow. Thanks for the drink, but I got to get movin'."

"Of course, John. Have a happy night."

Shaft strode out of the bar and headed for the IND express station at Columbus Circle. Go look for a cab driver. What a bunch of bullshit. All he had to do was step off the curb and a cab would find him—with its front fender. It was really very funny. Where was Cara Herzel? That was Alexander's hundred-dollar question.

"Last time I seed her, boss, her little ol' ass was parked in mah little ol' bed in little ol' Greenwich Village."

Just like that.

"But don't get me wrong, boss. We ain't makin' no

nasty on the sheets. No, sir! We's just roommates, is all."

He smiled. He considered running over to the detested office to see what mail was piling up. Fuck it. He'd go home and check on his roommate instead. First, the Bronx. Then home.

If David Alexander wanted her a hundred dollars' worth, she wasn't just a chick who crapped out on the carpet of Fifth Avenue salons.

But what?

Arnold Berkowitz had always wanted to be a police officer. Not a cop. A police officer. The dream had sustained him throughout a depressing childhood in Yonkers and a brief, unhappy apprenticeship in wool importing. But Arnold Berkowitz had broken away and joined the New York Police Department. He had proved a natural for certain types of duty. He had a flair for dramatics. Berkowitz led the squad in arrests when the police began their crackdown on Central Park muggers by dressing police officers in women's clothes. Berkowitz—in bell-bottom jeans ("You got a great can, Arnold," the sergeant said) and a blond wig—had found his place. He studied for each undercover role with all the zeal of a Broadway actor. Now, as a young Hassid, he had done more than grow *paes* curls and a beard: he had absorbed the very essence of Hassidic philosophy and piousness, even to the extent of *davening* three times daily while facing east.

And John Shaft irked him. Not only because Shaft had nearly fractured his jaw, but because he considered

Shaft a crude, brutal, dirty-mouthed bastard who could not be trusted. He was right, of course. He had expressed his feelings to Lieutenant Anderozzi, but the lieutenant (who considered Berkowitz a good cop but a real pain in the ass in his own way) had paid little if any attention. His only comment had been short and to the point.

"Don't be a pain in the ass, Arnold."

Berkowitz could not accept such advice. He didn't like Shaft and he didn't trust him. How a sage . . . a regular *davan* like Simon Solomon could was beyond his comprehension. Shaft was double-dealing the old man and somebody had to keep an eye on him.

"Don't be a pain in the ass, Arnold."

He'd keep out of Shaft's way, but he'd be watching the sonofabitch like a hawk . . . not with his own eyes all the time, of course. He hadn't been a police officer for nine years without making some contacts. In fact, Arnold had more than the usual number of pigeons willing to sit on his shoulder and whisper secrets into his ear. Arnold was known on the street as a mean little prick who had to be buttered like a bagel to be controlled. They listened when he passed the word around —the big spade who worked at Blackburn's, the tough dinge who had an office in Times Square and called himself a private investigator, the spook who lived in the West Village. Berkowitz wanted him watched, he wanted him tailed. Hookers, newsboys, hackies, junkies, cowboys, and other midnight roamers got a piece of the action. Arnold Berkowitz followed Shaft's movements through the city the way a radar operator follows the bleep on his screen.

The apartment gleamed. It shone like old silver. For a moment Shaft thought he had the wrong hole in the wall. Even the walls had been washed. The cause of this transformation stood in the living room wearing a neatly ironed dress. She looked as bright and shiny as the apartment.

"I hope you do not mind, but I cleaned your house."

"I can see that. Yeah . . . well."

He stood there not knowing what else to say. He had a paper sack in his hand with enough plastic forcite in it to blow the apartment across the river into Jersey. Cara Herzel made a move to take it from him.

"If you brought food, it was not necessary. I went out and bought some things."

He held the sack away from her. "You shouldn't have done that . . . gone out, I mean."

"I felt very safe."

"Maybe you *felt* safe, but don't do it again . . . not unless I'm with you."

She followed him from room to room, talking as though she had just discovered the power of speech. She had had $1.95 in her purse and she had bought chicken wings, rice, tomatoes, two onions, and olive oil and still had $.35 change. She had blown the $.35 on a bottle of ammonia to clean his walls with. She didn't figure. Most chicks he'd have worried about them going south with the stereo or the radio. But this one . . .

"Eat," she said, piling his plate with chicken and rice.

He ate, mostly in silence, while she consumed half as much food and smiled at him warmly over mounds of rice.

"Okay. Thanks for the meal . . . thanks for cleaning up the place. Now we have a little talk."

She frowned, all over. Her whole posture was defensive.

"I want to talk about your father," he said.

He took her into the living room and she sat anxiously on the edge of the couch, watching him as he paced slowly in front of her.

"You are going to look for him?"

"Maybe," he said. "That depends on what you can tell me."

He questioned her, slowly and patiently, dragging her over the same ground time and time again.

No, she did not know Morris Blackburn. No, she did not know a David Alexander. No, she did not know why the Israeli security police were looking for him. They said something about gems. But it was all no . . . no . . . no, with only a few viable facts coming out. Shaft kept pressing her for total recall, and after twenty minutes of artful probing on his part, she was able to tell him verbatim what Ben Fischer had told her in his office:

"He has in his possession a substantial number of gems. And they jeopardize his life."

"You're positive that's what he said? Jeopardize his life?"

"I am positive."

"Was your father ever a dealer in gems?"

She smiled. "No, of course not. He was a scientist . . . a physicist."

"But he had gems. Where did he get them?"

"I do not know."

He paused. The next question was a tough one.

"Could he have stolen them?"

Her anger was like the slash of a whip. "Impossible! I do not think you understand my father at all! I tell you about him but you do not understand him."

"Look, Cara—there are guys looking for your father with guns. There are other people looking for him, too. And you're not being much help in telling me why. He wasn't a dealer but he had gems. Everybody loved and admired him. But his government sends goons to bring him back. Now what does that add up to?"

She was deflated, mystified.

"I do not know." Her voice was a whisper.

Shaft sighed. Okay, she didn't know. He tried another tack. "You say he was a physicist. What was he working on in Israel?"

"I am not sure. It was very secret. I know that he worked for the government, but that is all that I know."

"Fine . . . that's a nice start. He worked for the government and the government wants him back. He left with something he shouldn't have left with."

"He is not a dishonest man!"

"He didn't have to steal it. Maybe it was in his head —a secret, a diagram for a bigger, better way to blow up the Ay-rabs."

"He was an idealist," she said, her voice trembling.

"Okay. He was an idealist." He paused to light a cigaret, waiting for her to simmer down a little.

"What kind of a scientist was he? I mean . . . what was his special field?"

"He was a pioneer in laser technology," she said proudly. "He was famous all over the world."

The term was meaningless to Shaft. He recalled

dimly that he had read about lasers once in *Life* magazine. It was a light beam. You could cut with it. He had been waiting in his dentist's office and his mind hadn't been on the article. Light beams. That was all he could remember.

"What do lasers have to do with gems?"

She looked blank.

Shaft nodded. He could find out in the morning by phoning Columbia or the public library.

The phone. The goddamn phone.

"Where have you been?" Amy Taylor-Davis asked.

"Oh—busy."

"Too busy to even call?"

"It gets that way. Look, I'm up to my ears in a thing and I got to swim out or drown. You know? I'll call you as soon as I can."

He looked at Cara and smiled, slightly embarrassed.

"I think, Mr. John B. for Bullshit Shaft, you are lying in dem pearly teeth of yours."

He was suddenly overwhelmingly outraged at the way she tried to push him around, bug him, use his guilt as a weapon. The girl, this Cara, was infinitely sweeter, finer.

"How'd you like to kiss my black ass?"

"That's the first imaginative foreplay you've suggested, darling—but not tonight—I'm eating Chinese. He's one of the diplomats at—"

Shaft dropped the phone in the cradle, the cunt.

He glanced at his watch. It was ten thirty.

"I have to go out," he said. "Keep the door locked and don't open it for anybody."

"You'll be back tonight?" She sounded plaintive.

Shaft smiled to himself. Under that core of iron, she was a girl afraid of the dark.

"Sure. I'll be back."

He hoped so. But who'd give him any odds on it?

Marc Bellikoff eased the big rented Dodge through the traffic on Christopher Street and watched Shaft head for the subway entrance at Sheridan Square. The black man was walking quickly and he carried a canvas bag of the type used by airline passengers.

"Shall I follow the bastard?" Enoch Belzer asked.

"Yes. But stay well back. If he gets out at Columbus Circle, keep on to the next stop and then take a taxi to Fifty-seventh and Fifth Avenue . . . southwest corner. Wait for us there."

He dropped Belzer off and drove two blocks up Seventh until he spotted a pay phone. He called Fischer at the hotel and told him what he had seen and what he had done about it. He offered no theories of his own. It was not necessary.

"He'll get out at Columbus Circle," Fischer said flatly. "He's going to Morris Blackburn's."

"That's what I thought," Bellikoff said, "but I put Enoch on his trail as a precaution."

"If he fouls it . . ."

"He'll be careful," Bellikoff said. "Don't worry about it."

"I worry about everything. We are close now . . . we can't ruin it."

"Shall I bring the car to the hotel?"

"Yes. We'll meet you in front."

Fischer hung up. The bags were under the bed in his room. He did not have to check them. He had packed the Sten guns and the small rocket launcher himself. He had loaded the clips by hand. He was a man who left nothing to chance.

It was now eleven fifty and, God willing, in a few hours they would have Avrim Herzel in their hands and on the next El Al jet to leave New York.

Fischer dismissed the thought from his mind. They would not fail . . . *could not* fail. He hoped no one would have to die for Herzel's foolishness, but as he dragged the guns out from under the bed, he dismissed that thought as unimportant to the main goal before them.

9

IT WAS SIMPLE. Willie's hand trembled only a shiver that could have been the cold as he slipped a plastic card into the slot in the steel door. The door opened with a loud buzz. He pushed the door back and secured it with a hook before walking over to the telephone set into a niche in the wall beside a time clock. It was exactly 12:30 A.M. He watched Lonnie wheel in the polishing machine and then go back into the alley for more equipment. The telephone rang and Willie picked it up.

"Lollipop," he said, using the code word Joe Mathews had given him to use for that evening. Blackburn's was Willie's third and last job for the night.

"How's it going, Willie?" said a voice on the other end.

"Fine," Willie replied. "Just fine."

"Ask Lonnie something. Some asshole keeps telling me that Ruth holds the record for the most home runs in a doubleheader, an' I say it was Killebrew."

Lonnie stepped through the doorway holding a carton filled with wax, scouring powder, rags, and short-handled squeegies.

"Who hit the most homers in a doubleheader, Lonnie? Ruth or Killebrew?"

"It was Stan the Man," Lonnie said. "Ol' Stan hit hisself five . . . May the second, nineteen hundred and fifty-four."

"It was Musial and you both wrong," Willie said into the phone.

Lonnie was a loser at that moment, too, because John Shaft stepped out of the darkness of the alley and swung a restrained, almost gentle chop with a small leather sausage full of birdshot. It took Lonnie just behind the right ear. He hung in the air for a moment like an elongated black Frisbee, then dropped to the floor with a mushy thud.

"Got to get to work," Willie said, hanging up. He looked at the sprawled figure of his partner. "Goddamn, he looks dead."

Shaft dragged Lonnie out of the doorway, and Willie walked gingerly around him and closed the door.

"We're back on the alarm system," he said nervously. "Open anything you ain't supposed to an' all hell breaks loose."

"What do we do with him?" Shaft asked casually. There was nothing in the ten by ten foot room except the time clock, the telephone, an elevator, and a flight of iron fire stairs leading up to the second floor.

Willie was growing more nervous by the second. His normally yellowish complexion was now the color of very old parchment.

"You *sure* he ain't dead?"

"What's the matter? Don't you know what hard heads we got? Scientific fact."

"He ain't moved. He ain't moved at all." Sweat was starting to condense on Willie's face.

Shaft glanced at his watch. Two hours. One hundred and twenty minutes to get the job done and he was standing there pissing those minutes away talking about Lonnie's health.

"Look, Willie . . . if I said he ain't dead, he ain't dead. Just tell me where we stash him."

Willie swallowed hard. Lonnie looked like he'd become part of the floor, as lifeless as cold concrete. He sure as hell *looked* dead.

"I dunno . . . I dunno . . ."

Sweet Jesus! Shaft thought. What a thief Willie would make, so scared he'd leave a trail of little green turds for the police to follow.

"Snap out of it! You took the fucking money, now *earn* it!"

"Okay, okay . . . ," Willie mumbled. "We take him up in the elevator."

"What's up there—floor by floor?"

Willie was staring at Lonnie. His lips were so dry it was painful to speak. "Offices . . . on the second floor. Also private showroom. Third floor . . . workrooms. We work third floor . . . tiled floors . . . wax 'em. . . . We'll put Lonnie on the second floor . . . in the hall closet."

Shaft knew the second floor, that section could be reached from the front side of the building. The elevator in the first-floor showroom went that far but no farther. There was nothing on the second floor that Shaft had any interest in, other than Blackburn's office.

Lonnie let out a low moan as the two men bent to pick him up.

"I told you he wasn't dead," Shaft said with some pride. "You feel better?"

"Yeah," Willie lied.

They got the inert, stone-heavy body into the elevator. Shaft knelt beside him, opened his flight bag, and took out a roll of two-inch surgical tape and secured Lonnie's hands behind his back. He didn't tape Lonnie's mouth; a man could choke to death with his mouth taped, and Shaft didn't give a damn if Lonnie yelled. He could yell his lungs out. No one would hear him.

"Do I leave the polish machine down here or take it up?" Willie asked, his voice trembling.

"You leave it here. It's got to look as though you were jumped right after you hung up the phone. That's your story, Willie. You were taken out while your back was to the door. Is that clear?"

"Yeah . . . sure . . . that's clear."

Willie was just mouthing words. Shaft shook his head in disgust. Willie and his caper!

"Okay. Let's get moving."

The elevator was plain and functional, unlike the glass and ebony minipalace that brought preferred customers up from the first floor to the sanctum sanctorum of Blackburn's office. Willie pushed the button for the second floor.

Two—three—and B, Shaft noticed. He had never seen an elevator in the basement, a fact that he mentioned to Willie.

"About a quarter of the basement was bricked up five or six years ago," Willie said. "They made a storage room out of it for stonecutting equipment—but that's

off limits now. We don't clean down there anymore."

"Since when?"

"A month . . . maybe more. There are five independent alarm systems and that's one of 'em."

"I want to get down there."

"You can't," Willie said quickly. He was starting to shake now.

Shaft eyed him coldly. "You told me you could jump those alarms. What's this shit now that you can't?"

Willie paused, more troubled by the minute.

"I know *how* to do it. It's just that I ain't never tried. What if something went wrong? What if I tripped something and the security patrol got here while I was still walkin' around?"

Shaft ignored the question. All he could hope for was that Willie calmed down. The elevator stopped at the second floor and the door slid open to reveal a plain hallway with several doors leading off of it. This was the back end of the building, the tail end of Camelot. The office of the bookkeeper, the purchasing agent, and Blackburn's secretary faced this hallway. There was also a mail room, two storage closets, and a toilet. They dragged Lonnie into the toilet and closed the door.

"I'll take Blackburn's office first. Any alarm system in there?" Willie shook his head. "You positive about that?" Shaft pressed.

"Yes." Willie couldn't look him in the eyes. "He's got a safe but it ain't much of a safe and it ain't wired up."

Shaft took a pair of thin, white cotton gloves out of his pocket and put them on.

"Okay, Willie. I'm going to get started now and you're going to stick right by me. If I need to get into a place that has an alarm, you're going to take care of it for me."

Willie stared at the floor. He looked 110 years old.

"I dunno . . . I dunno if I can. . . ."

Shaft forced a smile through taut lips. "You can do it, Willie . . . just like you read in all the books. You know all about it."

"Sure," Willie mumbled. "Sure."

"You just do it the way the book says. You're an electronics expert and you're on your first job. Twenty-five thousand bucks an hour, Willie . . . and no deductions."

"Okay." The word was barely audible but he had said it. He had gotten the word out—and he meant it. Not with all his heart. There was a part of Willie that wished he had never been born, let alone encountered John Shaft. But . . . he was so deep into it now. And fifty thousand dollars waited in a brown manila envelope.

"You could go down in history as the first chocolate-flavored Jimmy Valentine," Shaft said.

Willie hoped that was good, whatever it meant.

The blue Dodge sedan pulled up to the corner of Fifty-seventh Street. Levi Yadin opened the back door and Enoch Belzer got in.

"Well?" Fischer growled.

"It went smoothly. I stayed in the car and went on to Sixty-sixth Street, then doubled back in a taxi. I was on the corner before the black man arrived. He walked

toward Fifty-sixth . . . going to Blackburn's. No doubt of it."

Fischer grunted and Bellikoff eased the car away from the curb and continued along Fifth Avenue. Fischer stared ahead, not saying anything.

No one intruded on his thoughts. Every man in the car knew his moods too well for that. Fischer's silences were legendary calms before hurricanes. The deeper the mood, the more violent the result.

There were three possible ways to make an entrance if they had to, Fischer was thinking. They could go in through the front of the building; they could go in through the back door that the porter used; or they could go through the alley door, the one with the card-slot mechanism.

Fischer's knowledge of the building was limited to what he and the others had observed, but he had reasoned correctly that the graceful old structure that would one day be torn down contained a building within itself, a section that could not be reached via the front showroom or from the back. Customers came and went all day through the front. The black man lugged trash barrels out of the back. But the side door was interesting. Twice a day a half dozen elderly men used it. They entered it in the morning and they left by it in the late afternoon. Fischer had seen enough diamond cutters and goldsmiths in Tel Aviv to recognize the breed on sight. They walked with the faintly stooped, myopic abstraction of men who spent their lives bent over workbenches with high-powered loupes screwed into their eyes. If Avrim Herzel was in the building at all, he would be in that section—perhaps in a secret room or a private apartment.

Three ways to enter the building—but all of them protected by silent alarm systems. If an entry were forced, a buzzer would sound in the headquarters of the company that patrolled Blackburn's. Armed guards would be sent out in a car to investigate. They would arrive within ten minutes . . . perhaps sooner.

Ten minutes. And yet his team had done such a job in much less time than that. The Beirut raid.

"What was the time at Beirut?" he asked no one in particular.

"Four minutes, twenty-seven seconds," Mordecai Tal replied promptly.

Fischer smiled to himself. Mordecai and his love of facts and figures. "Four minutes, twenty-seven seconds? Amazing. Still . . . twenty-seven seconds too long."

Beirut. All of the men had been with Fischer on the raid nine months earlier. An Israeli diplomat had been kidnapped by a Syrian terror squad and held in an apartment house less than ten blocks from the headquarters of the Lebanese police. It had been a tricky situation, with notes passing back and forth between the Lebanese and Israeli governments. The Lebanese were fearful of terror squad reprisals if they stepped in; the Israelis were reluctant to establish a precedent by paying the ransom. Fischer's team broke the deadlock. They went into the building rolling concussion grenades down the halls, kicking in doors with Sten guns at the ready. Two terrorists died for twitching in the wrong direction. The diplomat was rescued and whisked by car to the airport and a waiting helicopter.

Four minutes, twenty-seven seconds—but they had known for certain that their man had been there.

"Stop across from Blackburn's, Marc," Fischer said. He looked at the three men in the back seat. They were wondering, he knew that. Wondering but not questioning.

"We must watch and wait," he said. "I am certain that our man is in the building and that they will attempt to move him. The black man must be considered dangerous . . . but then, I don't have to tell Mordecai and Levi that. So be on your guard. If the black man comes out with Herzel, hit him quickly. Take no risks. Kill him if you have to. If he does not come out with Herzel, then I want him alive and in a condition to talk."

"What if he won't talk?" Bellikoff asked.

"He'll talk," Fischer replied. "Enoch, you and Mordecai go around to the cellar door. Levi and I will cover the side. Marc, you stay with the car. When you let us out, pull up the block so that you can watch the front. If there are any questions, ask them."

The last was perfunctory, a matter of routine. He did not expect questions. It was simply a phrase that he always used, a relic from his days with the British armed forces in 1942. He had been one of seven men transferred from the Jewish Brigade to the Special Boat Service, a spectacular commando unit that operated in the eastern Mediterranean. The commander of his team had been a painstaking man who trained his men to the very letter of the mission at hand, and yet before departure, he would always mouth those words. But he would have shot a stupid fool who had not listened and had a question.

Bellikoff switched off the lights and the team climbed out. Mordecai Tal opened the weapons bag on

the floor in the back and handed each man a Sten gun. He placed his own gun on the seat as he removed the rocket launcher and a canvas belt containing five rounds of hollow-nose rockets. The rockets were no larger than aerosol cans of insect spray, and they packed just enough explosive to punch a hole through a door—any door—without blowing door and building to pieces. He slung the launcher and its ammunition over one shoulder, picked up his Sten gun, and followed the others into the darkness.

Any decent New York cop would have been offended. Machine guns and rockets on Fifth Avenue? Next thing you knew, it wouldn't be safe to walk the streets at night.

It had been obvious to Arnold Berkowitz what the nigger was up to as soon as the report had been given to him. He had known in his heart that Shaft would find the temptation of working at Blackburn's irresistible. He had never underestimated Shaft's intelligence or overestimated his honesty. The man would use his newly found knowledge of the building to work out a plan for getting his hands on some ice. When a hackie cruising down Fifth Avenue had spotted Shaft walking toward Blackburn's carrying a flight bag, he had phoned in that information to Berkowitz.

"Thanks," Berkowitz had said. "Go ahead and send the crap to your brother. I'll see the guards get it to him."

He had hung up and reached into the bottom drawer of his desk, removing a notebook that contained

a complete record of every commercial building in the precinct with either a burglar alarm system or a night watchman. He had flipped the pages rapidly . . . Blackburn, Morris: Jlrs. SA. PP. TR 3-2964. This informed Berkowitz at a glance that Blackburn's was a jewelry store, that it had a silent alarm system, and that the service was handled by Paragon Patrols, Inc., the largest such service in midtown Manhattan.

It would have been simple to call Paragon, tip them off, and have them shoot over there with all guns drawn to catch Shaft in the act. He rejected the idea. He had a score to settle with the black sonofabitch, and he was going to handle it his way. He'd get the dinge as he came out with his bag full of sparklers. He'd get the drop on him. He wouldn't lay a hand on the man. He'd get all the satisfaction he wanted watching Shaft's face when a judge packed him off to Attica or Ossining for ten—twenty—or, if Shaft was armed, life. The thought had given Berkowitz a warm glow.

He still felt that glow as he parked his car in front of Donovan & Cathcart. The Smith & Wesson police special, a forgotten lump most of the time, was now a comfort under his long, black coat. He knew one thing for certain—John Shaft wouldn't be happy.

If he had a gun, well—Berkowitz reflected on that prospect for a moment, and he drew his revolver and held it tightly in his hand. He walked slowly toward the Blackburn rear entrances.

There was little cover in the building's alleylike rear area. And even that was not absolute. Light filtered in from the street and bounced off the windowless façade

that made the rear portion of the Blackburn building look like a prison wall, or the monolithic tomb of an ancient king. Fischer and Levi pressed back against the tightly shuttered side door of Donovan & Cathcart, squeezing their bodies into the narrow alcove of the frame. They could not be seen from the street, but neither could they see, and when they heard the slow, measured footsteps of Arnold Berkowitz coming up the alley, they dared do nothing but hold their breath and wait, Sten guns pressed tightly against their legs, fingers curled on the triggers.

Berkowitz passed them, walking cautiously, intent on his plan of entrapment. The years that he had spent in the robbery division had equipped him with a vast fund of knowledge of the ways and means of burglary. A silent alarm system was effective, but not foolproof. It warned of forcible entry, but there were methods of queering the system if a man had ready access to the interior of the building. As Blackburn's porter, John Shaft had such access. He could have spliced a wire to the alarm cables on the cellar door in such a way that when the door was opened the current would not be broken. He could also have made a wax impression of the lock and made himself a key. He was so convinced that this was what Shaft had done that he could almost hear himself giving testimony in court.

"We matched the wire found on the door with wire found in Shaft's apartment. We also found a plaster mold in his apartment bearing the imprint of a key . . . a key cast from that mold was found to open the cellar door of Blackburn's. . . ."

He felt euphoric as he reached the end of the building. The narrow alleyway at the back of Blackburn's was

a cul-de-sac, nothing but a storage area for trashcans. There was no way out of it. When Shaft emerged, he would have only one way to go—right into the arms—and the gun—of the law.

A Hassid . . . with a gun! It didn't seem possible, but both Levi and Fischer had seen it plainly. A revolver, its blue steel barrel reflecting light with a dull glow. If Levi was troubled by the sight of a man dedicated to piousness and the love of God carrying a weapon of death in his hand, Fischer was amused by it. Such paradoxes of behavior were things that he had learned to expect. They served to entrench his cynicism. A Hassid with a gun? A nun with a hand grenade? Why not? He smiled in the darkness, aware of Levi's discomfort and perplexity. Levi saw only the gun, but Fischer saw the last piece in the puzzle fall perfectly into place. The black man and the Hassid had converged at Blackburn's. Any doubt in his mind that Avrim Herzel was in the building was instantly dispelled. And yet . . . the Hassid was not entering the building. What was he doing? Why did he stand there? What was he waiting for?

Fischer's brain sorted out the possibilities. The man could be a lookout, in which case Herzel and the black man would be coming out any second. He could be waiting for someone to join him, perhaps the other Hassid, the old one with the white beard. But why wait with a drawn gun? There was no way to resolve the questions other than to wait and see what developed.

The minutes stretched out—three—five—Fischer could only estimate the time, he did not dare move his arm to glance at his watch. The Hassid remained where

he was, a black shape in the gloom, an ominous, increasingly disquieting shape.

The Hassid must be put out of the way. Fischer's mind settled on that idea, closing on it like a steel trap. The man was a peril. He stood on their flanks. He split the fluidity of the team by his presence. No matter from which door Herzel and the black man emerged, the Hassid was in a position to interfere with the team's actions. Fischer gave Levi a slight nudge in order to alert him, then he slipped away from the doorway. He moved soundlessly, a man used to the darkness, sure of his actions. To Fischer, the Hassid was a sentry—and there had been many sentries . . . German, British, Arab. This Hassid would be luckier than most: there was no throttling wire in Fischer's hand, no broad, pointed knife designed to snap the spinal cord. He had only the Sten gun, which he would not use, and the power of his right fist, which he would use. He gauged the distance, steeling his muscles for the final lunge.

Arnold Berkowitz heard nothing, but he sensed danger a split second before it became a reality. Fischer brought his fist down like a hammer, aiming for the base of the skull; but Berkowitz jerked his body forward and the blow caught him on the shoulder blade and sent him spinning to the ground. He was stunned but conscious, and he reacted out of blind instinct—he jerked the trigger of his gun.

The bullet snapped past Fischer's head like the crack of a steel whip, struck the corner of the building, and howled off into the night.

Arnold Berkowitz never had a chance at a second shot. The sound of his shot still echoed in the narrow

canyon of brick and stone when Levi Yadin jumped from the doorway and pumped a three-shot burst into his body from a ten-foot range.

Rage shook Fischer, not because the Hassid was dead, but because he had been so foolish as to fire. The Sten had made very little noise, three sharp barks, but the big revolver had gone off like a cannon. The sound may not have been heard on Fifth Avenue—or if heard, dismissed as the backfire of a truck—but what of the man, or the men, inside the building? The sound of a shot would alter plans . . . change things . . . and not for the better.

Damn! He looked into the grim faces of Enoch and Mordecai as they ran up from their positions.

"It's Beirut," he said. "Only we must make better time."

Mordecai Tal nodded wordlessly. Slipping the rocket launcher from his shoulder, he ran to the side door, knelt on the ground six feet from it, slipped a shell into the breech, and fired. There was a streak of orange flame, a sharp report, a burst of molten sparks, and then the door was open, its lock assembly punched out by the rocket as neatly as a steel drill bites through soft wood.

10

IT HAD BEEN GOING like a hundred-dollar watch . . . a piece of cake . . . smooth as silk. . . .

Blam!

Blam!

and the safe in Morris Blackburn's office had sagged, the thin steel door caving in on its blasted hinges. Shaft had been amazed at how little forcite he had needed; and the noise factor had been negligible. Even Willie had begun to perk up and look happier about things.

"Just keep counting the money," Shaft had said. "Just sit down and think about it."

Willie hadn't exactly done that. He was still too jumpy to sit. But he hadn't unraveled. He had stood in the doorway and watched Shaft with a peculiar detachment as the man rifled the safe, not looking for money, just taking out papers, ledgers, checkbooks, anything with writing on it, selecting a few items, spreading them out on Blackburn's desk in the glare of the desk lamp, and taking pictures of them. That had taken about twenty minutes, and then Shaft had wanted to go up to the top floor.

It had been a disappointment. As soon as they had stepped out of the elevator, Shaft had known in his heart that he wasn't going to find a damn thing up there. The floor was a workshop—a machine shop—benches, tiny lathes, grinders, bench saws, jigsaws, tool racks, faceting machines. It could have been a room at General Motors; a big, windowless, air-conditioned plant. Only the safe had been intriguing, a banklike vault, shiny as a new dime.

"Wired," Willie had said. "A time-lock job wired to every police station in the city. You wanna blow it? Or just take its picture?"

Now Willie was turning smart-ass.

Shaft wandered around the room, looking at this, touching that. He had been examining a floor-to-ceiling steel grid at the head of the stairs when Arnold Berkowitz fired his last shot on earth. Fischer had been wrong. He didn't hear a damn thing.

"What's the cage for, Willie?"

"Security. No way up here except by elevator. No way to use the elevator in the daytime except by key."

Willie was warming up. Maybe, he had thought, Shaft wouldn't ask to go down into the basement. He and Lonnie had been warned by Paragon about going down into the basement. There were electric eyes down there . . . even an acoustical alarm that would go off if anything bigger than a rat walked within three feet of it. A nasty electronic jungle, that basement, and Willie knew he'd blow it if he messed around. There were some things a man could learn out of a book and some things he couldn't. He had been thinking about the basement when Mordecai Tal pressed the switch on the

rocket gun to send a surge of battery power to the charge in the rocket's tail.

Booooommmmm!

The sound came up the elevator shaft and the elevator cage rocked and creaked.

Willie screamed. It wasn't a loud scream. It sounded like the yelp of a puppy who had just been walloped with a newspaper for peeing on the carpet.

"Holy Jesus! What was that?"

Shaft didn't answer because he didn't know what the hell to say.

They stood where they were, waiting. Not knowing what they were waiting for. And then there was a whirring sound and the elevator doors glided together and met with the finality of a coffin lid.

The tiny spark of courage that had been growing in Willie's breast went out like a match in a hurricane.

"I ain't takin' no rap!" His voice wavered on the brink of hysteria. "You broke in on me . . . you forced me . . . you—"

Shaft swung a lazy hand and slapped Willie across the jaw with his knuckles. Backhand. Hard. Willie's legs folded as though they were hinged and he fell to his knees.

Shaft ignored him. He could hear movement downstairs, the sound filtering up the stairwell, heard over the hum of the elevator as it moved to the bottom floor. There were footsteps on the stairs . . . an irregular pattern . . . two or more people coming upward two steps at a time.

Tripped an alarm! That was his first thought. That idiot Willie had allowed him to trip an alarm. He wished

he had the time and place to kill Willie or at least make him watch while he burned the fifty thousand—bill by bill. Paragon Patrols, Inc. Shit! They'd offered him a job once, a long time ago. Drive around in a blue and white car in a fancy blue and gold uniform. He'd turned the job down. He'd met some of the men. Small-town cops mostly, men who had come to the big city but didn't make the regular force. He couldn't imagine any of those fat assholes *running* up stairs. But running they were, the iron stairs clanging like a bell. They were on the second floor already, he could hear them running along the corridor. There was the splintering crash of doors being kicked in followed by the *brrrrppppp brrrrppppp* of light machine guns.

Machine guns!

Oh, shit, he thought. Who the hell was down there?

He drew his snubnosed .38. It was a gun that could slap a hole through a plaster wall, but it felt tiny and useless in his hand.

Brrrrpppp brrrrpppp.

Plaster dust and acrid smoke drifted up from the second floor in thin plumes of gray and white.

The shit was coming down for sure.

The team worked with the icy precision and supreme grace of men who knew exactly what was expected of them. They did not look for orders nor expect any. They had sized up the situation the moment they had entered the small room on the ground floor. An elevator—a stairway. Levi Yadin pressed the elevator button to bring the cage down. It was his duty to protect the rear. When the elevator arrived, he would nullify it as a means of exit by locking the doors open. Fischer

and the others went up the stairs, reached the second floor, and spread out. Doors. Most of them closed. Kick the doors open and strafe the ceilings of the rooms. Men might hide in a room, behind a desk, in a closet, but the thudding, explosive jar of the shots always flushed them out . . . brought them to their feet pale and shaking.

Fischer took in the destruction of the office—the broken safe—the papers strewn across the desk and floor. Someone had been in a hurry to find something, but he didn't have the time to speculate on its significance.

The toilet door was shoved open by Enoch, shoved open with difficulty because Lonnie was lying against it like a doorstop.

Lonnie was a quiet man. A loner who had never done anyone any harm. He didn't know what had happened to him, or why. The last thing he remembered was telling Willie about Stan the Man and then the lights had gone out. Now he was lying on the floor with his hands behind his back while a man knelt in front of him, a mean-looking dude with a nasty sawed-off tommy gun in his hand, the ugly black muzzle pointing up his nose. It was all too much for Lonnie. He rolled his eyeballs back into his head and escaped from reality.

Fischer paused in the center of the corridor. A tendril of smoke coiled from the machine-gunned ceiling of the bookkeeper's office and drifted toward his head. The situation was curious. The blasted safe . . . the tied-up black man. Very curious, but there was nothing to be gained in wondering about it.

Time was running out on them. He raced toward the stairs and the others followed him.

Shaft pushed the elevator button. Nothing happened. Not even a click from the lift machinery in the roof. Dead! The mother was dead and the gooks were after him again, slanty-eyed sonsofbitches he left dead in Nam, coming up the stairs, pounding on the steel grid, shaking it. From Shaft's position in front of the elevator, he could see only hands gripping the flexible steel rods.

Shit, who *were* they?

His scalp crawled. A bony claw was crawling up his spine to clutch the back of his head. He gripped the .38, pointing it at the arch of the stairway, waiting for the first of them to push it down by weight of numbers and come howling in wearing their black pajamas, gooks!

Fischer and Enoch Belzer stepped back down the stairs and Mordecai aimed the rocket gun at the chain barrier. The rocket shrieked like a soul in the pit, slammed into the grid where it joined the floor, and the curtain of steel split apart, bent rods whirling into the room like a tangle of shiny spears. Enoch was the first through the breach, jumping into the smoke with his Sten at the hip, facing toward Shaft.

He looked grim, deadly, and alien with the stubby little gun in his hands. Shaft didn't wait to see what he was going to do with the machine gun. He squeezed. The deadly bee in the copper jacket crashed through Enoch Belzer's brain. Enoch spun in the drifting smoke and fell backward, the Sten gun dropping from his hands and clattering down the stairs.

The end of the road, Fischer thought. He felt a pang of regret at seeing Belzer dead. A good man, but rash. He should have known better than to leap into the unknown. Fischer lay flat on the stairs, poked his gun around the edge of the wall, and held the trigger down, the gun high so that the stream of bullets thudded into the ceiling. Light fixtures and fluorescent tubing crashed and popped.

"Throw your gun out!" Fischer yelled. "Now!"

"Fuck you!" Shaft bellowed as he dove under a workbench. Shit. The man thought he was going to kill him. The cat was crazy. Bullet-crushed plaster seeped from the ceiling above his head and fell on the steel workbench. The room was thick with dust and smoke and oh, Jesus, was it quiet. He could see Willie huddled against a wall, and the sight of his terror-stricken face was no comfort at all. He wiped sweat and dust from his forehead and tried to think. There was no way out of here. Those lunatics on the stairs . . . the elevator jammed . . . no way.

"Throw your own gun out!" he shouted.

A short burst of fire, the bullets hitting the far wall.

Well, he'd got an answer from the motherfucker. He rested his shoulder against a steel cylinder that stood by the corner of the workbench—a tall, green cylinder with a smaller, red-painted one standing beside it. Welding equipment. Shaft scratched the side of his head with the barrel of the .38. He had seen jewelers using tiny jets of flame to solder and braze silver and gold. Hell, yes . . . tiny little pinpoints of flame . . . but the oxygen and the acetylene they used had come in big cylinders . . . just like these. They had John Shaft in a

box, but they hadn't nailed down the lid yet. His flight bag was near the elevator door, and he thanked God for that because he didn't have the time to go scratching around for what he needed. He crawled out from under the bench, picked up the red cylinder of acetylene, plucked the rubber hose from the brass nipple, and gave the valve handle a turn. A healthy stream of gas hissed out. Beautiful. It would be tricky. He might burn his face off, but oh, what a lovely light! A spark igniter dangled from the side of the bench on a chain. Shaft flicked it close to the escaping gas. *Whoooffff* . . . a stream of yellow fire shot out from the nipple valve, thin as a pencil. He opened the valve as far as it would go, lifted the cylinder above his head, and hurled it toward the stairwell.

"Bomb!" he shouted. "Bomb!"

It looked like a burning plane . . . like a runaway flame-throwing tank. It bounced once before reaching the stairs and then tumbled down it in hissing ropes of flame.

Shaft was up and running, dimly aware that someone was screaming. Someone was burning. He tore open the flight bag, dumping the contents on the floor, grabbed the steel jimmy, and jammed it into the crack of the elevator door. He pried back against the frame and the door opened . . . wide enough to get his hands on it. He shoved the door back and leaped into the cold void, arms wide. He hit the cable and hugged it to him, pressing his face to the thick wire. Down, baby, down. Slide . . . like a fucking fireman . . . slide . . . slide . . . slide.

Levi Yadin crouched against the wall by the time clock. From that position he could cover the stairwell, the door, and the immobilized elevator. But his only concern was the door . . . and the two sweating men in blue uniforms with gold piping who stood just inside it, their faces to the wall and their hands above their heads. The Paragon Patrol car had come into the alley 4½ minutes after Fischer and the others had gone upstairs. The men had strolled casually to the door, thinking only that the niggers had neglected to close it properly. Their headlights shining up the alley and the crackle of their radio had given Levi more than enough time to prepare for them. Now they faced the wall, their shotguns at their feet, sweat running into their shoes; two middle-aged, lumpy men in silly-looking suits.

"You won't get away with this," one of them said for at least the tenth time.

"Oh, God," the other one whined. "Will you just shut up about it?"

"He won't get away with it," the man repeated doggedly. "He won't."

Levi paid no attention to them. They could do all the talking they wished, but if they moved . . . if they so much as reached down to scratch an armpit, he'd rivet them to the wall with the Sten. His nerves were stretched out thin by the sounds that had reverberated through the building—the crackle of small-arms fire; the dull boom of the rocket; distant screams; and now the thud of something landing on top of the elevator. The access panel in the roof gave way with a splintering crash and fell to the bottom of the cage.

Levi spun toward the sound. "Who is it?" he yelled in Hebrew. "Who is there?"

Shaft took the .38 out of his pocket and jumped down through the hole in the roof, shooting as he came, emptying his gun into the partially closed doors, aiming toward the sound of the voice.

Four of his bullets struck the floor, but one tore into Levi's right leg, smashing bone, kicking him off of his feet. He fired the Sten as he fell, the gun wobbling and jerking in his hand, the slugs chewing up the frame around the elevator. One bullet crackled the air by Shaft's head, whispering death into his ear.

Not that way, baby, Shaft thought wildly . . . not out the door. There was maybe an alley full of the bastards out there . . . a whole convention of Sten-gun owners. Fuck it. Lonnie's box of cleaning junk had been used to prop open the elevator doors and Shaft booted it out of the way, pressed the B button, and the elevator moved down . . . but down into what?

He didn't give a shit. Some kind of hell was taking place above him. He could feel shock waves from heavy-gauge shotguns penetrate the walls of the elevator shaft. There was nothing above him but *boom boom boom.* World War III was starting on Fifth Avenue.

The elevator bumped to a halt and Shaft stepped out into a sealed tomb, a positive dead end; a short passage lined with empty packing crates and sacks of sand terminating at a brick wall and an iron door. A low-watt bulb glowed eerily in the ceiling, protected by a wire mesh. The place had all the charm of a dungeon. Shaft ran to the door and tried the handle. It was locked.

Of course it's locked, he raged. What the shit did he expect?

He sat down on a sack of sand. He'd reached the end of the line and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it. Even at this depth below the street, he could hear the wail of sirens coming up and down Fifth Avenue and along every cross street from the Battery to the Harlem River. It sounded like all the cops in the state were streaking for Morris Blackburn's before the fun was over.

"End of the fucking line, man," he said wearily.

The elevator began to clang. Not move, just clang like a bell with a dull ring. It puzzled him for a second until he figured out what it was—someone was sliding down the cable just as he had done, coming right to the bottom.

"Oh, those miserable motherfuckers." It was a statement straight from his heart. There could be one or there could be ten of them. Maybe he could hold them off with an empty gun, but he wouldn't have taken bets on it.

If there was one thing he had learned in Nam, it was self-preservation. None of that hero shit. He rolled against the wall and burrowed down under the sandbags like a fox seeking the cover of mother earth. He didn't see Ben Fischer spring down into the passageway with the rocket launcher in his hand, but he did hear the nerve-ripping scream of the shell plowing into the iron door. A sandbag split with the concussion, and dry sand poured into his ears. There was another muffled explosion and then only the silence of drifting sand. Shaft raised his head

slowly. It didn't seem possible, but he was safe. He was alive.

A cold wind blew down the passage—a fresh wind —the wind of the night. Shaft ran through a haze of burnt cordite and into the room beyond the shattered door. He stumbled over part of a table and collided with a sagging workbench strewn with instruments. A laboratory for a scientist . . . centrifuge and generators . . . transformers and switches . . . tubes of metal and glass. The sight nagged at the mind. Under the bench was a hole in the wall, a rocket-blasted hole just wide enough for a man to crawl through and escape into the confusion of Fifth Avenue. Shaft was thinking of doing just that when the first wild-eyed cop entered the basement carrying the biggest shotgun Shaft had ever seen.

"Hold it, buddy! Hold it right there. Don't move a goddamn muscle!"

And Shaft didn't.

There was nothing that Lieutenant Anderozzi liked better than sleeping with his wife, especially in the wintertime. He was oversexed—after twenty-three years of marriage, the fires get banked. But his wife had the softest, warmest ass in the world, and his hard, lean, and generally cold frame curled around those golden cheeks with the precision of a grapefruit rind. By the same token, there was nothing that Anderozzi hated more than to be dragged away from this comfort by a telephone call at one thirty in the morning. His displeasure was still evident in every line of his face, from the sharp blade of his nose to the razor gash of his lips.

He wadded a coffee-stained paper cup in one hand and tossed it deftly into a wastebasket. Two points.

"Let's go over it again, John."

"I've told you everything I know," Shaft said, his gaze fixed on the window behind the lieutenant's head. Dawn was slinking along East Fifty-first Street, but Shaft was watching the window more to avoid the look in Anderozzi's eyes than in appreciation of the sunrise.

"You're wonderful," Anderozzi sighed. "I don't know what it is you smoke, but they ought to make it legal. It would pep up the goddamn world. There are so many charges hanging over your head it'll take three grand juries to bring in the indictments. And yet you sit there like you didn't have a problem in the world."

"I didn't do anything wrong . . . as far as I can see."

"Then you're blind. You're blind as a stone wall."

Shaft spread his hands in wonderment. "Is shooting a man in self-defense against the law? A burglar with a machine gun?"

Anderozzi said nothing. He couldn't trust himself to speak. After a moment, he stood up, walked across his office, and shut the door, leaning his back against it.

"I've never been a believer in brutality, Shaft. Any police officer who kicks a prisoner is shit in my book. But by Christ I sometimes wonder . . . I sometimes wonder if it wouldn't be a good idea . . . just to save a lot of time . . . if we had a rack and a thumbscrew in the basement!"

"That's a lousy attitude for progressive law enforcement, Vic."

"Don't call me *Vic,* you sarcastic sonofabitch! You've been sitting in that chair for an hour and you

haven't said a straight word yet. I warned you, Shaft. One day you'd go too far, and this is the goddamn day. So don't call me *Vic* . . . don't assume that any friendship I *might* feel toward you is going to save your ass."

"What am I being charged with?"

"I'll think of something. Don't worry about that. It might not be enough to hang you, but I'll get your license. By the time I'm finished, you couldn't get a job in this town sweeping crap off the streets."

"I believe you."

"You'd better." He walked back to his desk and sat on the edge of it, facing Shaft, studying his face. He knew the bastard was lying and holding back, but just how much?

"What were you doing there in the first place?"

"I dropped by to see a buddy of mine . . . he works with the cleaning crew."

"Bullshit."

"I dropped by to see my pal Willie, found the door open, and walked into an old John Wayne movie. I admit to killing a man. But he was pointing a gun at me . . . a Sten gun, for Christ's sake."

"You broke into Blackburn's," Anderozzi said flatly.

"Was the door forced?"

"No, but as soon as that *buddy* of yours calms down enough to be questioned, I'll get what I need."

"Don't count on it."

Anderozzi sighed and reached across the desk for a pack of cigarets. He lit one and blew smoke toward the fly-stained ceiling.

"The name of the man you shot in the head was

Enoch Belzer. That mean anything to you?"

"No."

"How about Ben Fischer or Marc Bellikoff?"

"Sorry." But there was the slightest note of uncertainty in Shaft's voice. Fischer . . . ?

"What would Israeli security agents want in a New York jewelry store?"

Well, Anderozzi thought smugly, that hit the mark. Shaft didn't fall off his chair, but his eyes flickered.

"I'm waiting, John."

"Look . . . ," he muttered bitterly, "I don't know what they were doing there and that's the God's truth."

"But you're not surprised that they were Israeli agents." Anderozzi stabbed out his cigaret on the edge of the desk. "You're starting to jerk me around again, John. To hell with you. A cop's dead . . . two Israeli agents are dead and one's dying of burns . . . the shit's in the fan from Gracie Mansion to the White House and you sit there jerking me around. I don't like it. I'm going to book you for manslaughter."

Shaft reached for Anderozzi's pack of Camels but the lieutenant slapped his hand away.

"You think I'm kidding you, John?"

"No," Shaft said. "But can I have a smoke before the firing squad gets here?"

Anderozzi's smile was like a crooked nail. "Are you going to stop jerking me around?" He held out the cigarets. Shaft took one. "What was the shoot 'em up all about?"

"I don't know, but Israeli security boys were tailing a client of mine. A girl. An Israeli girl."

"This part of the Solomon business you're working on?"

Shaft shook his head. "No . . . I don't think so."

"Then why did Berkowitz get it?"

"I can't answer that. I didn't even know he was dead until you told me."

"What would he have been doing outside Blackburn's?"

Again Shaft shook his head. "I'm not taking the Fifth, man . . . I just don't know why he was there."

"Okay, maybe not." He lit the cigaret for Shaft. "Let's go back to this client of yours. Why was she being tailed?"

"Something about her father . . . guy by the name of Avrim Herzel . . . some kind of scientist. He blew the country and they want him back."

Anderozzi's eyebrows were expressive. "Defected? From *Israel?*"

"I know, I know. But this isn't a girl who would lie about anything . . . and she *was* being tailed. I spotted two of them and she told me there were a lot more."

"Where did you meet this girl?"

"At Blackburn's."

"What was she doing there?"

"Having hysterics all over the showroom. They asked me to get her out of there and put her in a cab."

"And did you?"

"Not exactly."

"Meaning . . . ?"

"I took her home."

Anderozzi's grin was lewd. "Another fox, John?"

"No!" He glared at Anderozzi. The dirty-minded sonofabitch to suggest that about this girl.

"What then?" he asked blandly.

"The kid was . . . well, she was in trouble. There were two guys on her and she was scared. I got rid of them."

"How?"

Shaft hesitated for a second. "Wiped 'em out in a delivery alley."

A glimmer of something way down a black tunnel. Anderozzi examined the tips of his shoes. They needed a shine. They always needed a shine, even when he had a shine.

"Okay," he said. "They spotted you leaving Blackburn's with the girl and you wiped 'em out. Then what?"

"Nothing. I lost 'em."

"Do you think they went to Blackburn's looking for this girl or her father—or you?"

"Maybe. I don't know why they went there. All I can tell you is that those cats meant business. Shit, they went through the joint like they were looking for Hitler."

"What were *you* looking for?"

Shaft inhaled deeply. "A buddy. My buddy Willie."

Anderozzi sighed. He felt tired . . . right down to his toes. It was six thirty in the morning. It was going to be a long day. He walked over to the window and stared out at a gray and grimy wall that imprisoned a city.

"Funny thing," he said softly. "There were dead

men and bullet holes . . . blown safes and blown walls all over the place . . . and I get a telephone call an hour and a half ago from Morris Blackburn. He is very polite . . . a very courteous man . . . he tells me not to worry about things too much because the thieves . . . the *thieves* took nothing. Wasn't that nice of him? He really thought he was setting my mind at ease. You know, they even used a bazooka of some kind . . . we found pieces of a tailed projectile. We thought at first they'd used a bomb because there was a flight bag with plastic explosive in it on the top floor . . . also a camera and some film. A nice camera . . . a Minox. Very expensive. You ever use a camera like that, John?"

Shaft wondered if he would have the guts to put in an insurance claim on the camera. "No. I got a Polaroid Swinger for instant dirty pictures. Turns me on."

Anderozzi turned away from the window and looked at John Shaft with sad eyes.

"What you do to make a dollar doesn't interest me at all. You walk a thin line, and one day you'll go over it so far you never will get back. I've known a hundred guys like you, John. They strutted around on the stage for a while, flashing their licenses, doing their thing, but they're all gone now. They all bit too much off and couldn't swallow it. Maybe I like you more than I like any of them. I'd hate to see you cash in that way—up the river . . . or in it."

"That advice go with the bust?"

"No bust," he said quietly. "Not yet. Just get the hell out of my office."

He didn't expect Shaft to thank him. He didn't expect him to do anything but what he did—calmly take

some cigarets from Anderozzi's pack and walk out of the room. The lieutenant picked up the phone, pushed one of the intercom buttons.

"Anderozzi," he said crisply. "Tail Shaft . . . but for God's sake be subtle about it. And I want a twenty-four-hour watch on Blackburn's. Send Anderson over to the Israeli Consulate . . . Yeah, that's right. Seventieth Street . . . I want all the dope he can beg, borrow, or steal on a man named Herzel, Avrim Herzel . . . H-e-r-z-e-l."

Lieutenant Victor Anderozzi was the world's most impartial human being—he had lived with the law and been comforted by it longer than he had lived with his wife, and this passion, his first, still burned. Fuck with it and you were in trouble—black, white, Jew, Arab, Italian, or greenhouse Wasp. Including John Shaft, the impertinent prick.

11

SHE WAS SITTING in the kitchen when he came into his apartment. He thought she might still be sleeping, so he entered on tiptoe, feeling something like what he imagined to be a suburban husband sneaking into bed after a night with the boys. He startled her as he passed the kitchen, and she jumped up from the table, spilling coffee on her robe—his robe.

"I was worried," she said. "So late and you did not come back."

A bleak, cold sun stained the room. It robbed them both of definition, reducing them to shades of gray. Her anxiety . . . her concern for him reached out like a caress.

"I was detained," he said thickly.

"The telephone rang . . . very early in the morning . . . three . . . three thirty. It woke me up and I thought it was you."

"Who was it?" He really didn't give a shit. He was only trying to be casual. Her standing so close in the morning stillness was getting to him. He was fighting back an urge to put his arms around her. It was not the kind of urge he was used to fighting.

"There was no answer," she said gravely, scanning his eyes. Her voice faltered slightly. "I said, 'Hello . . . who is this?' I could hear someone breathing and then there was nothing. It frightened me."

She still looked scared. He reached out and put an arm around her, drawing her close. Oh, hell . . . what was he doing? Comforting her or comforting himself? He had tasted some fear himself this night. Now they both needed the exercise of comfort, the exorcism of tension. His fingers sought the black richness of her hair, and he tilted her head back and kissed her gently on the mouth. Her body acknowledged the request, moving against his own, warm, fluid. Welcome home from a hard night's dying. This is for the living.

He undressed her as they walked to the bedroom, slipping off the robe, undoing the pajama tops, one button at a time, his fingers sure, but slow and tender. The moment was mutually acknowledged; they approached it with soft certainty, without the frantic haste of doing a guilty thing and getting it done. They moved toward the bed like figures in a dream, and she was naked when they reached it. He turned her to face him and stepped back . . . just a little . . . just far enough to memorize the glowing young body but not so far that he couldn't touch her. The large, dark hands that hired out for day-rate death now glided across the flatness of her belly, up the delicate tracery of the rib cage, and over the small, soft mounds of her breasts. Her nipples were buds of dusty rose, stirring at his touch. He could feel the pulse that burgeoned them between his fingers. Her body radiated the warmth of life—life and promise in a morning that had begun in violence and negation. He touched her shoulders and she turned away from

him to flow softly down onto the bed. If he had needs, she had her own. She stretched out languidly, odalisque in soft gray light, waiting for him. He smiled at her.

"Why do you smile, Mr. Sha-aft?"

"I smile because I'm happy," he said. "Because you're a woman, a full-grown woman, and there's nobody in this bed but us."

"Yes," she said, her voice low, husky. She shared his smile. "I won't shatter. You don't have to be so . . . so gentle with me, Mr. Sha-aft."

The overtness of her sexuality surprised him. He stripped off his clothes and knelt beside her on the bed. She reached out for him, her hands clasping his waist, pulling him to her, their legs moving in the ancient, flawless ballet of the bed.

"I will not break," she whispered fiercely.

No. She wasn't glass, but he wanted to be gentle. He entered her slowly, watching her face. They gazed at each other in a silent communion, and he tried to gauge the depths of her pleasure by what he saw in her eyes. His body shuddered as he searched for her response. She closed her eyes and began to breathe soft, deep sounds of ecstasy's invitation, her legs rising to clamp him in a smooth vise of warm flesh. They moved together in a slow, steady, excruciating rhythm that went on and on until lights were exploding in his brain and she was clawing at his back and gasping words against his mouth in a language that he didn't know and yet understood so well.

Morris Blackburn had not called Anderozzi's office —David Alexander had done it. He had phoned the

lieutenant because Morris Blackburn had been incapable of doing anything but sitting in the chair behind his desk and staring at the ruin of his private safe. David Alexander had handled all of the myriad details calmly and efficiently, conducting his inventory with a swiftness and a thoroughness that had brought grunts of appreciation from the hard-bitten crew from Robbery Division. Morris Blackburn had shown no similar appreciation.

"You'll be happy to know that nothing was stolen, Morris," he had said.

Morris Blackburn had only stared at him with haunted eyes.

It was now eight o'clock in the morning and he stood with Morris on the sidewalk in front of the building. The wind was cold and it fluttered the awning over the main doors, billowing the canvas like a spinnaker.

"You shouldn't drive, Morris," he said, holding Blackburn's arm solicitously. "Let me drive you home."

Blackburn wanted to say no. He wanted David Alexander to take his hand from his arm, but his voice failed him and he felt incapable of any action.

Alexander's smile was as thin and cold as the wind. He steered Blackburn to the Rolls, opened the door for him, and helped him inside. He then walked briskly, confidently, to the driver's side and slipped behind the wheel. He touched the walnut dash lovingly.

"What a beautiful car this is, Morris. Such impeccably good taste."

"What do you want, David?" Morris whispered. His inner panic was so intense that it hurt his throat to speak.

Alexander looked at him quizzically. "Want? What

could I possibly want, Morris? I have your love and your friendship. I want nothing more than that—except, possibly, your trust."

Blackburn turned his head away and looked out the side window as Alexander started the car and drove down Fifth Avenue. He turned right on Fifty-fifth Street.

"Where are we going?" Blackburn asked tensely. "I want to go home."

Alexander nodded in understanding. "I know you must be tired, Morris. It's been a harrowing night for you . . . for both of us. I'll take you home, but I thought a little drive would do us good. Let's drive through the park and talk."

"I don't want to talk," Blackburn said. His tongue felt thick, and so dry it clove to the roof of his mouth.

"But we have so much to talk about, Morris. It's so much fun to chat, especially with you. Do you remember how we used to chat? All the plans . . . all the dreams. I made a lot of those dreams come true, didn't I, Morris? I made them come true because I wanted you to be happy . . . and secure. I wanted you to be a rich, successful, important man. I still do. I'd do anything for you, Morris, and that's why it hurts me . . . just a little . . . to know that you lied to me."

Blackburn gripped the edge of the seat in a struggle to hold onto his sanity. "Never lied . . . not to you . . . never."

"Don't be childish, Morris," Alexander snapped. "I'm really surprised at you. Really, I am. You lied about Avrim Herzel. I don't believe you fired him at all. He was much more than just a cutter, wasn't he, Morris?

I mean . . . I saw the place you fixed up for him in the basement. So did the police. So did at least one of the men who broke in last night. You told me it was just a place where he could work undisturbed . . . but what were those machines for? What *was* he doing down there? And where has he gone? You didn't do something silly, did you, Morris? You didn't do a silly thing like *kill* the man?"

Morris Blackburn started to whimper.

"Poor Morris." Alexander felt genuinely distressed. He hated to see anyone unhappy. He pulled the car into the curb and stroked the back of Blackburn's neck. It was wet with the icy sweat of fear.

"You have to tell me everything, Morris. You really must. I can help you . . . I *will* help you . . . but I have to know the truth—*all* the truth, Morris, not just some of it. Then we can go from there and get all this nasty business straightened out. You know I love you . . . you know I'd do anything for you . . . *anything.*"

"Help me," Blackburn whispered.

"Of course I'll help you. I don't care if you lied to me, Morris . . . I really don't. I don't mind at all—*now.* I know you love me. You do love me, don't you, Morris?"

"Like a son," he said hoarsely.

Alexander smiled wistfully. "I don't want you to love me like a son, Morris. I want you to love me like a wife."

Morris Blackburn stifled a groan, then bent his exquisitely elegant head and vomited between his

feet. It looked even worse on the carpeting of a Rolls-Royce.

Fischer was on his own. He was not a man to underestimate anyone, especially not the New York Police Department. It would take their ballistics experts only seconds to determine that the Sten guns found at Blackburn's were of Israeli manufacture. If it hadn't been for that insane comedy involving Bellikoff and Belzer, the police could have done little but wonder about it. But Belzer was dead and there were men who could recognize him. Detective Feldman was no fool. He had sensed something. Fischer had been sure of it at the time; he was doubly sure of it now. He was on his own. Bellikoff was on his own. The hotel abandoned. The car abandoned. There was no question of diplomatic immunity in a situation like this. The government would disown them. It was as simple as that.

Fischer looked out the window of the subway car that was taking him under the East River to Brooklyn. His face stared back at him in the grimy window, a hard square of a face. The face of a fighter who had taken all the punches that could be thrown at it. Taken them and spat them back. Disowned . . . out in the cold . . . well, he had been out there before. It wasn't a unique experience. The team had been blown to hell. The mission had foundered—foundered, but not sunk. His mistake had been in misjudging the black man. The black man had Cara, and perhaps Cara knew more about her father's work than she had admitted. She had been so wide-eyed, so innocent when he had questioned her in

Tel Aviv, so close to childish tears. But tears could be faked. So could innocence. She had gone willingly with the black man, all too willingly, and the black man had made her talk. It is easy to make a woman tell you things in bed, Fischer thought. He smiled at a memory . . . the wife of a cabinet minister in Ankara . . . a little of this, a little of that, a firm application to the job at hand, and then she had talked . . . she had babbled . . . she had poured words into his ear so that he would not leave . . . that he would stay . . . just one more time . . . just once more. . . .

The car rattled and swayed. It smelled of stale air, sweat, poverty. It shuttled the residue of dreams from one part of the city to another. A man sat opposite Fischer; a thin, shabby man with a pallid face and blank eyes. Who would that man betray for the riches of the earth? Who would that man *not* betray!

Cara had known everything and she had told the black man. The black man had then gone to Blackburn's in the middle of the night to steal the Herzel formula. Perhaps the Hassid had been in on it with him. Had the black man been successful? Maybe yes, maybe no. He could flip a coin for the answer—or he could get that information from its source. He would like to see the black man again, but that could wait. . . . He leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes. He needed a few hours of rest before he could work out his plans. He would make Morris Blackburn talk. He would wring him dry. He would clear up the matter once and for all. Then he would teach the black man a lesson. Over the rumble of the wheels he could hear Mordecai shrieking as the fire

engulfed him. Yes. He would like to see the black man again.

Cara opened her eyes and watched a pattern of the sun on the ceiling. The pattern did not move. It seemed to be etched into the plaster. She shifted her head on the crumpled pillow and studied the face pressed close to her own. A good face, she concluded after a long, careful analysis. Good bones. Good skin. Black as coffee is black. She pulled the sheet down to her hips and looked at the way his body curled against hers. No blending. A sharp division. Black coffee in a white cup.

She traced tiny patterns on his hip with a fingernail but he did not stir. She wrote "you are beautiful" in Hebrew, the letters standing out in sharp white scratch lines for a moment before slowly fading. But he made no move toward her. She marveled at the depth of his sleep. She slipped out from under his wide-flung arm and walked naked into the living room. The robe lay on the floor, and she put it on before going into the kitchen.

Water was boiling in the kettle and she was imitating his coffee-making ritual when the doorbell rang. It rang with the persistence of someone leaning a finger against it. She thought at first that she should wake Shaft, but decided against it. She did not have to let anyone in if she did not want to. The buzzing continued until she reached the door.

"Who is there?" she asked.

The buzzing ceased and there was only silence.

"I said . . . who is there?"

"A *shalom* to you again . . . and please to open."

Simon Solomon sat on the couch, balancing a cup of coffee on one knee and a plate of dry toast on the other. If there was one sure way of telling a Jewish woman from a *shiksa,* it was her insistence on serving a "little something" with every beverage. She had thrust the coffee and toast on him even though he felt far too agitated for either. He had demanded to see Shaft and would have gone bursting into the bedroom if she hadn't blocked his path.

"Have a cup of coffee. You are angry. He is tired. It is a bad combination. I will wake him, gently."

She had been right, of course. It was a bad combination; but when Shaft came into the living room—yawning, stretching, wearing nothing but pajama pants—he was still angry.

"You sleep," Solomon said bitterly, "while my world falls in pieces! There is no talk on Forty-sixth Street today but what took place at Blackburn's last night. There is panic . . . dread! I was a fool to have listened to your madness!"

Shaft felt his own jolt of anger. He glanced over his shoulder. Cara was in the bedroom and the door was closed. He turned back to Solomon and stabbed a long, thick finger into the old man's chest.

"You're fucking right I sleep. I sleep because I'm on my own time. I didn't get a job from you, I got a basket of snakes, and I'm handing the mothers right back. To hell with your fucking world—it stinks!"

"So does yours!" Solomon shouted, his body trem-

bling with rage. "All those dead men! A little b-a-n-g you say . . . a few broken doors you say . . . *Gevalt!* Why all the killing?!"

He sat back heavily on the couch. The coffee cup that he had balanced on the arm fell to the floor and rolled under a table.

Shaft ignored the stain. He scratched his chest. The old man worried him. He didn't want him to drop dead in his living room.

"It's been a pleasure working for you," he said. "Just one laugh after another. But there are certain *elements* in this case that I don't understand and I have a feeling you don't understand—unless you haven't levcled with me."

"You know everything I know," Solomon said fiercely.

"What does laser mean to you?"

Solomon raised both hands and shrugged his shoulders. "Laser? A light beam. Why do you ask?"

"What would lasers have to do with diamonds?"

"Diamonds? Nothing. Well, perhaps a little."

"How little?"

"A little little. Once, ten, fifteen years ago, there was some experimenting with lasers on rough-cutting the stones. Some people thought it would be better to use them rather than to saw or cleave the roughs, but it was not practical. The equipment was too expensive and cutters were reluctant to change their ways. This is a very conservative business, Mr. Shaft. Very set in its ways."

"And that's it?"

"Yes."

Shaft bent forward so that his face was inches from Solomon's.

"*Herzel,*" he said with awesome intensity, watching for the barest flicker of an eyelash. There was nothing. Blankness. Incomprehension.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Shaft. You asked me once to speak in English. Please do the same. I do not understand your slang. What is a *herzel?*"

"It isn't a what, it's a who. A very important who. A nice old man. Like you, Mr. Solomon, only this nice old man triggers a lot of hate and spills a lot of blood. I wish to hell you knew what Herzel meant. I really do, because if you don't find out pretty damn quick, I'm going to take your five hundred and seventy-four thousand dollars and burn them with all the other fucking pipe dreams I ever had."

Solomon looked troubled. "You are dropping this case?"

"It's crossed my mind."

"I would like to talk you out of it. If it's a question of money . . ."

Shaft's laugh was hollow. "Money won't buy the time of day in this case. It won't buy shit. I just threw fifty grand down the toilet, so keep your hand out of your pocket and leave me alone. I want to think about it. If I decide to drop you as a client, I'll let you know. I'll phone you, for a change."

Solomon got shakily to his feet. Everything he held dear was falling apart around him. Order, decency, trust, good faith—all disappearing from his world. It was the holocaust all over again, and his anguish was sculpted in every line of his bent body.

Shaft felt sorry for him. He even showed him to the door.

David Alexander sat in the afternoon dimness of Morris Blackburn's apartment and watched him sleep. He tossed so much, poor man, flinging his arms about, crying in his dreams. David Alexander sighed and wished that he could comfort him. Poor Morris. He was so easily disturbed, so panicked by little things that were of no consequence. It had always been that way, even in the very beginning. Morris wanted so much, craved so many things, and yet he had been squeamish about doing anything to acquire them. That is, doing anything that might be messy.

"I'll leave all the—the details to you, David."

But then, why not?

David Alexander was very good with details. He had done all of the jobs with an adroitness and a smoothness that had become, even without his knowing it, a trademark. The police departments of six cities shared one thing in common: each had an unsolved crime committed by the same man. The lone jewelry salesman, the .32 caliber slug in the brain. The trademark of a vicious killer. Alexander smiled. They always put that phrase in the papers. *A vicious killer.* They couldn't have been more wrong. He did not consider himself vicious. He had never felt any anger toward those men. He had simply killed them. There had been times when their surprise had amused him. But vicious? Never.

Morris Blackburn sat up with a sharp cry, breathing

heavily, still struggling with his nightmare. Alexander walked over to him and stood by the side of the huge oval bed.

"You've been asleep all afternoon, Morris. Would you like me to fix you a drink?"

Blackburn shook his head. He was lying fully clothed on the bed, except for his shoes. A blanket covered him, and yet he felt chilled. He had been dreaming of wet sand and clay, wet clay filled with diamonds, fabulous stones. But he had been drowning in the muck. Sinking. Going under the way Herzel had gone under the black water of the river. He shuddered and drew the blanket up to his chin.

"I have to go out for a while, Morris, but I'll be back. Something has to be taken care of and it can't wait. I should have gone much earlier, but I didn't want to leave you alone. Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine," Blackburn whispered. "Leave me alone." The sight of Alexander standing beside his bed terrified him.

"I'll never leave you alone, Morris," Alexander said. "You'll be grateful for that one day. You really will."

He turned and left, the sound of his footsteps deadened by the thick, oyster-white carpet. When he had gone, Blackburn sat up and pressed a walnut carving on the side of his bed stand. The top rose with majestic slowness to reveal a silver and gold bar. There was an inscription etched on the silver underlid: To my Morris—from his Louise.

The inscription belonged to another age, another world. He picked up a bottle at random and took a long

drink, spilling a good part of the contents over the white silk coverlet.

Cops. One in front of the No Name Bar, another standing in front of a shop on Hudson Street. How apparent they are, Alexander thought, so obvious in their studied casualness. The police were really a terrible bore. He had been watching for them, expecting them. He would have been terribly surprised, even disappointed, if they had not been there. He continued on down the street, walking jauntily in the white, rather threadbare jacket that Blackburn's man always wore whenever he cleaned silver or did other menial tasks around the apartment. The cardboard bucket with CHICKEN DELIGHT stamped on it completed his disguise. A delivery boy going into an apartment house on Jane Street would hardly be a figure for comment, far less alarm. He was whistling as he turned up the steps of the building where John Shaft, a porter who was not, lived. He found Shaft's name on the mailbox and climbed quickly to the second floor. The hallway was neat, clean, but dark. Atmosphere, he thought wryly. The West Village mystique. He took off the jacket, wrapped the bucket of chicken in it, placed it carefully to one side of Shaft's door, and then rang the bell.

"Yeah?" The big, deep voice was filled with suspicion.

"Avrim Herzel." He had the accent pat . . . just the way he remembered poor Avrim telling him his name when he first wandered into the salon.

"My name is Herzel . . . Avrim Herzel . . . I was a

friend of Morris Blackburn's father in Germany . . . many years ago. . . .

But so Hebraic. *V*'s for *w*'s . . . *t*'s for *d*'s . . . *oi*'s for *e*'s. A raggedy Jew man. The door opened as though it had been pulled back by springs.

"Hi there, John," Alexander said, smiling up at him, the .32 automatic with the stubby silencer in his hand, pointed straight at Shaft's right eye. "May I come in?"

He sat back in a chair and eyed the two of them. They sat on the couch facing him, the girl with her hands folded in her lap, Shaft with his arms stretched above his head. It was a delicious scene. A scene worth savoring.

"Why don't you just get it over with?" Shaft said.

"I told you not to talk, John," Alexander said peevishly, "and here you are talking. It's not fair. You're not playing the game."

Cara's hands trembled in her lap but the movement wasn't apparent.

"You're a very pretty girl," Alexander said softly. "I've been wondering what you looked like since hearing your voice on the phone. You said 'Hello . . . who is this?' in a very pretty way. I would have replied, but I had nothing to say at the time. I do now."

He crossed one leg over the other, but the gun in his hand never wavered.

"I hate to be the one to tell you, but your father's dead. He had an accident."

Cara jerked forward and started to get to her feet, but the shock of the words was too much for her legs to carry. She simply moved forward on the seat, staring

at Alexander with her mouth open. Shaft made a move to touch her.

"Don't do that," Alexander snapped. "You make any kind of move and I'll kill you."

"You're going to kill me anyway," Shaft snarled.

"Am I?" Alexander said blandly. "I haven't made up my mind about that yet . . . don't press me."

Shaft stayed where he was, poised on the edge of the couch. Cara was staring at him, seeking a wordless comfort.

"What are you after, Mr. Alexander?"

"Don't be sarcastic, John. The play is over. You were a good porter, but a bit too servile. Looking back on it, you played the role badly. I'm surprised that I fell for it as long as I did. I'm usually more thorough than that. I check things out. If I had gone to the trouble, I would have found out your real occupation. Private investigator. You didn't even bother to change your name. There aren't many John Shafts in the New York directory."

"So I'm a detective. So what?"

"Who hired you to work at Blackburn's?"

"That's confidential."

Alexander's smile was thin as wire. He leaned casually forward. "Let me tell you, then. Lloyd's hired you. Or DeBeers Consolidated. You were a plant. You can bomb a city and nobody gives a damn, but steal a diamond and half the world rises in arms. You were a plant, one of many in the trade. A nigger in the woodpile, so to speak. Then you met Miss Herzel and she told you a few things. Right, John? She told you a few things and you turned on your employers. You turned

on *both* your employers. You went to the shop last night to find the Herzel formula. Did you really believe Morris would have it in his safe? Were you that stupid?"

"I was that stupid," Shaft said. He didn't know what the cocksucker was talking about. He just wanted him to keep on talking. He needed time. Shit, he needed all the time he could get. Thank Christ he was a faggot. They were vain and they couldn't shut up.

"In fairness to you, and I mean this honestly, you were the lesser fool." He beamed a smile at Cara's stricken face. "Your countrymen must have been insane. Of course, I can only assume they *were* your countrymen sent to bring the prodigal grandfather home. You know, all those Sten guns lying about the place. Sten guns are so *Jewish.*" He turned his death's-head smile on Shaft. "It must have been a terrible shock to you. Still, you handled matters very well. You left your toll, and the police were sufficiently confused by it all to let you go—for the time being at least, but the police can get so pushy sometimes. They push and push and you might just tell them what you were after and that might open up a nasty can of worms."

How could he buy more time from this asshole? The Herzel formula—whatever the hell that was—was a dead end.

The names. What were the names? Solomon had mentioned one. Fish something. *Fishbein*, Leopold Fishbein. But there had been others. Five others. Names, Christ, he needed some names. Men who had died before he went to work at Blackburn's.

Max Lishkin. The name just floated up out of the murk. Max Lishkin. Well-known diamond salesman.

Dead in a Miami parking lot. He had barely glanced at the item while skipping on to see how the Knicks were shaping up against the Celtics.

"I never did find the—the Herzel formula," he said, keeping his voice even, conversational. He had to sound sure of his position. "But the people who hired me still got their money's worth. I found all I needed on the Lishkin case."

He had tossed the name into the pot with enough casualness to give it meaning. Alexander rose slowly from his chair, his boyish good looks turning hard and ugly.

"You're a liar," Alexander said. His voice was taut, but it lacked conviction.

Shaft bared his teeth in what passed for a grin. "My people want those diamonds back. No questions asked. If you want to talk about it, sit down."

Alexander sat down. Slowly. He still held onto the gun, but it wasn't so directly aimed. He was shaken. He could recover from the shock any second. Shaft knew that. He had to keep him off balance, keep rocking him.

"Go to the desk, Cara, upper right-hand drawer . . . get me the copy of my letter to Brodkin Associates."

Smart girl, Shaft thought. A fast thinker. No staring at him for a beat, no hesitation. She just stood up and started toward the desk as though she knew exactly what she was going there for. Alexander swung the gun toward her, then quickly back toward Shaft.

But not quickly enough.

Shaft's right leg came up with all the force he could squeeze out of his six-foot frame. His foot slammed straight into Alexander's knee with the crushing power

of a sledgehammer. It is a curious anatomical fact that knees do not bend in, only out. Alexander's bent in as the kneecap splintered, and Alexander jerked backward against the seat, a scream tearing at his throat, but the gun still in his hand. Shaft went in under the gun, feeling the sharp, scorching blast of it sear the hair on his head. He caught Alexander's wrist and tried to shake the gun loose, but the man fought back like a slightly damaged wolf. The fingers of his free hand hooked into claws, raking Shaft's face, digging for his eyes. Shaft turned the wrist inward, trying to snap it, trying to break the hand off. The pressure crushed Alexander's fingers, mangling them against the butt and the trigger guard of the gun. The gun coughed, the slight sound further muffled by Alexander's body. And he died staring into Shaft's face, a look that seemed to be a plea for understanding and love before it turned to the frosting glaze of sudden demise.

12

SHAFT EASED ALEXANDER to the floor and left him lying beside the coffee table.

"Is he dead?" Cara whispered.

"Yeah," Shaft said. He had a corpse in his living room after all. He glanced up at Cara, who stood rooted to the floor, staring down at Alexander with a strange fixity.

"Go in the other room," Shaft said. "He isn't a very pretty sight."

Cara shook her head. "No. The dead are never pretty. Do you think he told the truth?"

Shaft picked up a brown shag throw rug and draped it over Alexander. "The truth about what, Cara?"

"My father. He could have been lying."

"Maybe. He was smiling when he told you. I think he liked seeing people in pain. He might have been playing. I'm sorry, but I just don't know."

He stood up and crossed to the window. Through a crack in the curtains, he could see the plainclothes cop strolling casually along Hudson. Anderozzi had a great

collection of dumb-dumbs working for him. Alexander was smarter—smart enough to fit a silencer to his gun. A good silencer, at that.

"Do we call the police?" Cara whispered.

"No. Not yet."

What did he have? A dead faggot who might or might not have shot and robbed six diamond salesmen in distant cities. The gun clutched in his dead hand might or might not check out ballistically as the murder weapon. He had one piece of a puzzle lying on his floor. It could be an important piece, but at the moment, it wasn't enough.

He looked at Cara. Jesus, but she had guts. She was pale as ashes and wobbling in the legs, but she hadn't unraveled on him, she hadn't gone screaming into the streets. But he didn't want her standing around watching him. She wanted him to reassure her that her father was still alive. He wished he had the answer to that, but he didn't. He put an arm around her and hugged her to his chest, just holding her very tightly, not saying anything.

"I'm all right," she said after a moment.

"Sure you are. But if you're going to hang around me, you gotta earn your keep. Fix me a cup of coffee."

He felt better when he heard her rattling things around in the kitchen. He paced the room, wall to wall. He wanted to hit the streets and run. A long, hard run through the cold evening. Down Washington Street to maybe Barrow or Morton and then over toward Washington Square. It'd be good for him and good for Anderozzi's watchdogs. Sweat the fat off them. He grinned. He could see their faces if he came running out

of the building. Hell, they'd probably shoot him in mid-stride, like an antelope.

He paced. Up and down, side to side. It was like taking a walk in a telephone booth, but it got the blood moving, the brain working.

Blackburn. The man was up to his neck in filth. He stood in crap but kept his hands clean. One of those. Let George . . . or Joe . . . or David Alexander do the dirty work. Let anyone on earth do it but him. The smooth-faced bastard sat in an ebony tower far above the slime, a long way from the screams of the dying. Fuck him.

". . . Did you really believe Morris would have it in his safe? Were you that stupid?"

Concern over the Herzel formula had caused Blackburn to send David Alexander on his errand, and whatever the damn thing was, it was too precious to be left in the office safe. So if not at the office, then where?

He stopped pacing and glared angrily at his desk. "Under my fucking nose, that's where!"

Cara stuck her head around the kitchen door and gave him a look of admonishment. "Your coffee is ready."

"You drink it."

He stepped over to Alexander's body, knelt beside it, and tossed the rug aside. Blood pouring from the hole in his chest had spread across his clothing the way a piece of blotting paper will soak up spilled ink. It seemed incredible that there could be so much blood from one wound. He looked to Shaft like a man who had been chewed by a tiger. There was a gasp from the kitchen door and the crash of a coffee cup hitting the linoleum. Well, it served her right for peeping.

Shaft went through the pockets, working quickly, doing his best to keep blood off his hands. Nothing in the jacket pocket, not even a cigaret lighter. Nothing in the back pocket of his pants but a slim wallet. Left pants pocket, nothing. Right pants pocket, keys. A slim leather key-holder with the initials M.B. stamped in gold. Shaft flipped it open. House keys and a car key, the car key in gold with a Rolls-Royce crest on it.

"Under my fucking nose," he repeated savagely. Shit, what was the matter with his brains. It was all in the notebook in his desk. The daily observations, the rumors and the second-hand tales gathered at the salon during the day and so painstakingly written into the book at night.

Leroy's son, Deacon. Andy's second cousin's boy, Deacon . . . tooling down to Florida in his new Maverick, the down payment taken care of by an unexpected sum of money handed to him by his boss—Morris Blackburn.

"He got the motherfucker out of the house!" He shouted it. Let Cara put her hands over her ears if she didn't like his language. He relished the sound of his own obscenities. He almost jumped for the phone and dialed. A receiver was lifted on the first ring.

"Shaft," he said.

"I was hoping for your call." Solomon's voice was strained, anxious. "You have decided what you will do, Mr. Shaft?"

"Yeah. I'm off and running. But I need a little help. I'm boxed in here. I gotta be free to move."

"Off and running? Off and running where, Mr. Shaft?"

"Blackburn's house . . . Sutton Place . . . but we'll

talk later. Get your . . . get over here as soon as you can and bring me a coat and a hat . . . big black coat . . . big black hat . . . just like you wear, Mr. Solomon, only larger."

"I don't think I underst——"

Shaft hung up on him and dialed another number with short, explosive strokes of his finger.

He got the No Name. Some broad or other laughing her head off in the background, almost drowning out the greeting of the bartender who answered the phone.

"Is Rollie Nickerson there?"

"Yeah, he's here . . . someplace," the bartender said. "Who wants him?"

"John Shaft. Tell him it's important."

He had to wait. The broad never stopped laughing. It must have been the world's funniest joke. Finally, Rollie's voice, the words slurred, oozing out of his mouth like sap from a tree.

"Hi there, br'er Shaft. How's Tar Baby tonight?"

Shaft cursed soundlessly. Rollie Nickerson doing his burrhead act. Rollie Nickerson, with his master's in theater arts from Columbia, stoned.

"Listen, asshole, I need a favor. Are you straight?"

"Anythin', cap'n . . . any*thing*."

He sounded like he'd been smoking the stuffing under the Naugahyde bar stools.

"How stoned are you?"

"Oh, I smoke a little dope on Tuesdays and Thursdays, but today I'm just fine . . . what *is* today, anyhow?"

"Oh, shit! Can you move?"

"Sure. Whatta you want, Sambo?"

"I want you to find a car for me."

"You want *me* to steal a car? Terrific! Always . . ."

"Not steal! Find. It could be anywhere in this area. Even down an alley. You'll have to hustle around but it's someplace close. A two-door Rolls. New model. Tobacco brown with fawn leather seats. A beautiful car. You won't miss it when you see it."

"Yeah. Okay. I won't miss it *if* I see it. Then what do I do? Kiss it? Throw a hump into a hubcap?"

"You drive it. Park in front of my apartment or as close as you can get to it. Leave the keys in the ignition and go back to the No Name. Okay?"

"What keys? Man, I'm not stoned—you are!"

"I'm sending someone over with them. A girl. A nice girl, so keep your hands in your pockets."

And that was that. All he had to do now was hope everything jelled; that Solomon arrived and that Rollie didn't wrap the car around a lamppost or the nearest loitering cop.

Solomon got there in fifteen minutes, red-faced and puffing from his climb up the stairs. The first thing he saw when he entered the room was David Alexander's feet sticking out from under the throw rug.

"*Oy Gottenyu!* Who is that?"

"David Alexander. Blackburn's man David."

"The blond *goy* with the angel face?"

"Not such an angel. He came here to kill me, and I'm certain he killed Max Lishkin. Hell, you must have discussed the killings with Berkowitz. What kind of gun was used on those salesmen?"

"A .32 caliber. All of them. All died by the same

gun. Every land and groove mark identical. Is that correct? Land and groove?"

"Yeah . . . well, golden boy there has a gun in his hand . . . a .32 caliber Ruger automatic . . . fitted with a silencer."

Solomon stared at Alexander's feet. Turning his head away from the sight, he spat on the carpet. *"Gonif!"*

It just wasn't Shaft's day for good housekeeping.

"Let's get on with it." He took the black coat that Solomon carried over one arm and put it on. It was tight in the shoulders but the length was fine. The hat was a little too big and bent his ears. He felt like an idiot, but it didn't seem to bother Solomon in the least.

"Be careful with the coat," Solomon said, touching the fabric idly. "It belongs to the Rebbe Goldstein. I would like to return it without any holes in the cloth." His thin fingers squeezed Shaft's arm. "You come back the same way."

It took Rollie Nickerson nearly an hour to find the car. It was in the parking lot of a supermarket on Greenwich Avenue, and he could have picked up ten thousand chicks driving it over to Jane Street. He had been tempted, but he had fought back. He pulled up across the street from Shaft's apartment house, blew the horn three times, and got out—reluctantly. Driving around in that beauty was strictly an upper.

"What can I do, Mr. Shaft?" Solomon asked. He was watching Shaft stuff a revolver under his armpit, a big, blue Smith & Wesson .44-40. A collector's item. A monster. But if he had to pull a gun on Blackburn, he wanted something that would scare the shit out of him.

"You can see that Cara gets in a cab."

"I should go with you," Cara said. "If my father is there, I should be with you."

"No," Shaft said flatly. "I want you to go to Brooklyn and stay with those friends of yours. I'll call you when I get back."

There was no thought of "if" in his mind. He went out into the street full of confidence. A big black rabbi climbing into a thirty-thousand-dollar Rolls-Royce should have caused a few heads to turn, but this was the West Village—nobody paid the slightest attention to him . . . not even the cops.

He parked the Rolls on the Fifty-eighth Street side of Sutton Square and walked down Sutton Place toward Blackburn's apartment. He kept his head low, the black cowboy hat shielding his face; he appeared lost in thought, a good Jew conversing with his God. He passed a florid-faced man walking a peppy wire-haired terrier, the dog pulling at the leather leash, straining to get loose and bite the hell out of this black-clothed apparition moving out of the darkness.

"Sit, Chester! Sit, boy!" the man snapped. He touched the peak of his Abercrombie & Fitch deerstalker as Shaft passed. "*Sholom alaichem.*"

"Sure," Shaft mumbled. "The same to you." He walked a little faster, the big .44 jogging up and down under his armpit, ruining the lining of Rebbe Goldstein's coat. Shaft's golden tablet, with six certain commandments.

There was a man directly across the street from Blackburn's apartment, standing on the curb, looking up and down the street as though waiting for a cab.

Shaft glanced at him. He didn't recognize him as being one of Anderozzi's boys, but that didn't mean a damn. It was a big police force. He averted his eyes, lowered his head even further, and turned into the black glass and stainless steel foyer of the apartment house.

M. Blackburn—9.

The nine mailboxes were unobtrusive, not that they should have been. They were works of art, chased silver plaques with slots in them. Shaft wondered what kept the mailman from ripping them out of the wall and hocking them. Nine mailboxes—nine stories—one apartment to a floor. Two kinds of people in this world, Shaft was thinking as the elevator whisked him upward, the nine in this building and the rest of us peons.

He stepped out into a foyer. White tiled floor and white walls, the severity softened by small trees growing in huge blue pots. The door to Blackburn's apartment had come from a palace in Italy, solid oak, bound with brass; but for all its weight and ponderousness, it opened with one turn of a prosaic key.

Shaft pulled out the .44 as he stepped through the doorway and into the hall beyond. He closed the door silently and leaned back against it for a moment. He could hear voices, strident sounds without meaning, coming from somewhere to his right. He walked into the dimness of a drawing room and then on through an alcove and into a dining room that would have done justice to Versailles. He could distinguish words now, harsh, strident . . . the voice of Morris Blackburn.

". . . think I'd write it down?! Am I a fool?"

A light under a door, thin as a razor cut. Shaft moved swiftly, pressed an ear to the door, and heard

the rumble of voices in the room beyond. Blackburn talking, but to whom? How many in the room? How many killers did he employ besides David Alexander? Shit, he could have ten men in there with him. Ten men with tommy guns.

"Then prove it!"

A sharp voice . . . whose? Who the hell was Blackburn talking to and what the hell were they talking about?

"My God! . . . What do you want?"

"Proof, that's all. Proof."

Shaft turned the door handle with infinite slowness and opened the door a crack. He could hear better and he could see a little. It was a study of some kind . . . very modern . . . desk . . . black leather chairs. Shadows moved on one wall, but he couldn't see who caused them without opening the door wider and sticking his neck into the room.

"I'm asking very little. Five hundred thousand a year and your protection. Your complete protection."

Blackburn speaking, his voice rapid, the pear-shaped tones not quite so rounded under stress.

"The money is nothing. . . ."

The voice stabbed at Shaft's memory. That hard, barking ring . . . the vague accent. . . .

". . . Prove to me without question that you have memorized the Herzel formula and I'll have you in Tel Aviv within two days. Safe. All trails dead."

Tel Aviv! Shaft pushed the door open a shade more. He could see part of Blackburn's face and the broad back of another man.

"Then what?"

"A new name," the man said. "A new life. Switzerland, perhaps. But I *must have proof!*"

"Damn you! I want to get away from here. Now. Tonight. I can't waste time. You'll get your proof in Israel. The old fool had a lab there, didn't he? Well, didn't he? *Answer me!*"

Shaft stepped quietly into the room. "What happened to the old fool?" His voice was soft, a whisper in the room. Blackburn's face went blank with shock. He could see only a tall black shadow. Only the gun in the shadow's hand had any substance, any meaning.

Ben Fischer turned slowly, as though he knew who stood behind him.

"I made a mistake," he said bitterly. "I should have gone first to you."

Shaft nodded, the broad black hat wobbling ludicrously on top of his head.

"Right. Maybe we could've straightened a few things out. You've been crowding me off the path, man. People gotta wait their turn to deal with old brother Morris."

"And you have him."

"You are so right, brother."

"To the victor belongs the spoils . . . but what if he won't work for you? Have you thought of that? He'll work for us. We can give him something in exchange for his knowledge, but what can you give him?"

"I can hear you talking, but I don't know what the shit you're talking about. Brother Blackburn isn't getting a fucking thing from me, except maybe a ride to the precinct house."

Blackburn laughed, one high-pitched, hysterical hoot. "You're insane!"

Shaft's eyes were pale circles in the shadow of his hat brim. He looked faceless. "Max Lishkin," he said. "Max Lishkin and five of his friends, not to mention Avrim Herzel. How's that for insanity? You shouldn't have sent David to kill me. I don't like faggots coming into my house. I nailed David and I'll nail you, you soft bastard. I'm going to turn you in to Homicide tied up with a ribbon. John Shaft's gift to law and order."

Whatever courage Morris Blackburn had been able to scrape together since Ben Fischer had burst into his apartment and altered the course of his life was now draining away from him like blood from a terrible wound. Panic tore at him, and he had to clutch the edge of the desk for support.

Fischer's smile was sardonic. "I can't let you do that. I feel sorry for you, but that is the way it must be."

Shaft never did see the small pistol spring out of Fischer's sleeve and into his right hand. One second the man's hands were empty, held in front of his chest, palms out, as though he were waiting for someone to toss him a basketball; the next second there was a gun in his right hand, a tiny black gun that went off like a firecracker under a tin can. Someone slapped a white-hot branding iron to his left shoulder and followed it up with another jolt to his side. Two shots and he was still pulling the trigger on the .44, taking up the slack, but when the hammer finally fell, the sound of it split the room, and Ben Fischer's head cracked with the noise, dissolved into a coarse, ugly spray of red, gray, and white. He collapsed in the far corner of the room as though blown there from the mouth of a cannon.

Morris Blackburn cringed against the desk and watched in mounting horror as this black apparition of

death moved slowly toward him. It was the golem of Prague come to get him, stepping out of the nightmare tales of his half-forgotten childhood. A golem, stalking him with death in his terrible hands and the stench of blood on his breath.

"What do you want?" He was saying words that had no meaning.

"I want you, Blackburn. I want you."

"Leave me alone." But he wouldn't leave him alone. He was coming to get him, inching across the room. A golem, or the angel of death. He grabbed an envelope from the desk top and held it out to Shaft.

"Diamonds. Take them. They're yours, Shaft. I made them . . . look . . . see? Diamonds . . ." He tossed them at Shaft's feet and they were kicked aside like so many pebbles.

"I'm turning you in, Blackburn." He was finding it difficult to think straight. The gun was like a ten-pound bar of lead in his hand, and something thick and hot was streaming down his side and across his chest. His shirt was sticky with it. "Turning you in."

Blackburn spun away from the desk and ran. Diamonds sparkled against a square of black velvet. They shimmered with their own captured fire and he ran to them with his arms outstretched. He wanted to hide his face in their brilliance and feel the softness of the velvet against his body. He raced for it, and the tall window exploded outward and he spun into the night, clasping the lights of the city, screaming into the cold air.

Shaft let the gun fall. To hell with the gun. He'd never liked that gun anyway. It had been a beautiful sight watching Blackburn. Jesus, but the guy was beauti-

ful . . . full of grace . . . style . . . soaring off to the clouds. It was a long walk back to the front door . . . such a long way. Miles and miles. Room after room. Endless. The door was jumping at him . . . rocking back and forth. A very unfriendly door. He thought to hell with the door. He didn't want any part of a door that acted that way. He sank to his knees in the hall and suddenly the door wasn't there anymore. He couldn't see the door. All he could see were cops. Hall to hall cops. And Victor Anderozzi. What the hell was Anderozzi doing there? Why was he kneeling in front of him like that? Why did he look so mad? He reached for him and tried to grab him by the arms. He didn't want to be hit for something that wasn't his fault.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Didn't mean to ruin—the rabbi's coat."

It was snowing. Shaft stood for a moment and let the flakes settle on his outstretched hands. Cool wetness. That was all snow was. Refrigerated rain. White misery. It was also a white Christmas.

"What are you waiting for? A snowball to form?"

Shaft eyed Victor Anderozzi with pity. "You're an insensitive man, Vic. No appreciation of the simple things in life. You see the world through hard eyes. But one of these days, when we integrate the weather, we're gonna have black snow, then you'll notice."

"Sure," Anderozzi grunted.

They stood in the shadow of Doctor's Hospital

and Shaft watched the traffic plow through the slush. Everything looked beautiful. The city was touched with magic.

"When you feel a little stronger, John, you might drop by for a chat."

"Love to do that, Vic."

"There are one or two things I'd like to straighten up. You know, clarify for my own peace of mind."

"Like what, Vic?"

"Oh, just for starters, why would William J. Scott, a porter in this city and a hard-working, God-fearing man, come into my office, throw an envelope with fifty thousand bucks in it on my desk, and ask me to tell you to shove every dollar up your ass? Why would he do a thing like that, John?"

"The Christmas spirit, Vic. This is a time for giving."

Anderozzi hunched his body against the driving snow, his knife slash of a face drawing back into the sheath of his upturned colar. "I figured you'd say something like that. I don't know why I even asked."

"Neither do I, Vic," Shaft said, inhaling the bleak day. "Neither do I."

"You want a lift someplace?"

"No," he said. "I'm waiting for a cab."

"I know two sure ways to get her to Kennedy on time," Norman Greenfeld said as he made a left turn into Delancey Street and headed for the Williamsburg Bridge. "Both of them ain't a scenic route, but one of them's faster."

"Go my way," Shaft said. "Make a left turn at Albany and a sharp right when you hit Kansas City." He looked at the smiling girl by his side.

"Don't go back, Cara. It's too cold to go anywhere."

"It's warm in Tel Aviv," she said.

"It's warm in Acapulco too. It's warm in Tahiti. Have you ever been to Tahiti?"

He reached over and held onto her hand. Hell, she'd never been anywhere or done anything. He had thought of a million things to do with her and now they wouldn't do any of them.

"Why are you leaving now? My first day out of that place."

She gave his hand a quick, hard squeeze. "If I didn't leave now, I would never leave. No, Mr. Sha-aft, I must go back to Israel. I have a job to do there . . . a duty."

"Israel!" Shaft said bitterly. "Ben Fischer country."

"Every country has its Ben Fischers."

He was forced to agree. There were a few CIA types skulking around Harlem and the Barrio who could have taught Ben Fischer a few tricks.

"Okay, you've got to do your duty. Don't be too surprised if you see me there one day. What the hell, I got a right to go there. I got like six pints of Jewish blood in my veins."

"The best," she said. "The Hassidim are noted for the purity of their blood."

You can't really say a good-bye to anyone at an airport; you can only peck at their cheeks and let go of their hands, mutter a few words, and watch them get

swallowed up in the crowd. Shaft did just that and then walked out of the El Al terminal building into the ear-splitting jet howl of the street. He got into the cab beside Norman Greenfeld and they headed back to New York. It had stopped snowing, and slender threads of ice blue sky sliced through the gray. Herzel in the sky making diamonds. Shaft looked away.

"What would you do if you had five hundred thousand dollars, Norman?"

"Sleep late on Mondays."

Shaft sat back and closed his eyes. It was warm in the cab and he let his mind drift. The first thing he'd do would be to burn his office. Take that pansy's dream of an office and burn it to the ground. Then he'd . . . he'd . . . what the hell would he do? Figuring out how to spend all that money was really going to be a drag. But he'd think of something. He always had.

"I've got a very inventive mind, Norman," he said.

And that was a fact.

(continued from front flap)

strange world—a world of large icy stones, of hushed, veloured showrooms, of rabbinically cast karate experts—dogged by his exasperated friend from the precinct, Lt. John Anderozzi, and paralleled by a task force of Israeli secret agents. The action is swift and unpredictable, by turns violent and comic, and while Shaft comes out on top, one cannot say he is never at a loss in Ernest Tidyman's pell-mell, sophisticated, and inventive caper.

ERNEST TIDYMAN is a novelist, screenwriter, and motion picture and television producer. His books include *Flower Power, Shaft, Absolute Zero,* and now *Shaft Among the Jews.* His screenplays include *Shaft, The French Connection,* and two films to be released in the near future, *A Stranger in Mesa* and *Shaft's Score.* He makes films through Ernest Tidyman Productions with headquarters in Los Angeles and writes from his home in Connecticut.

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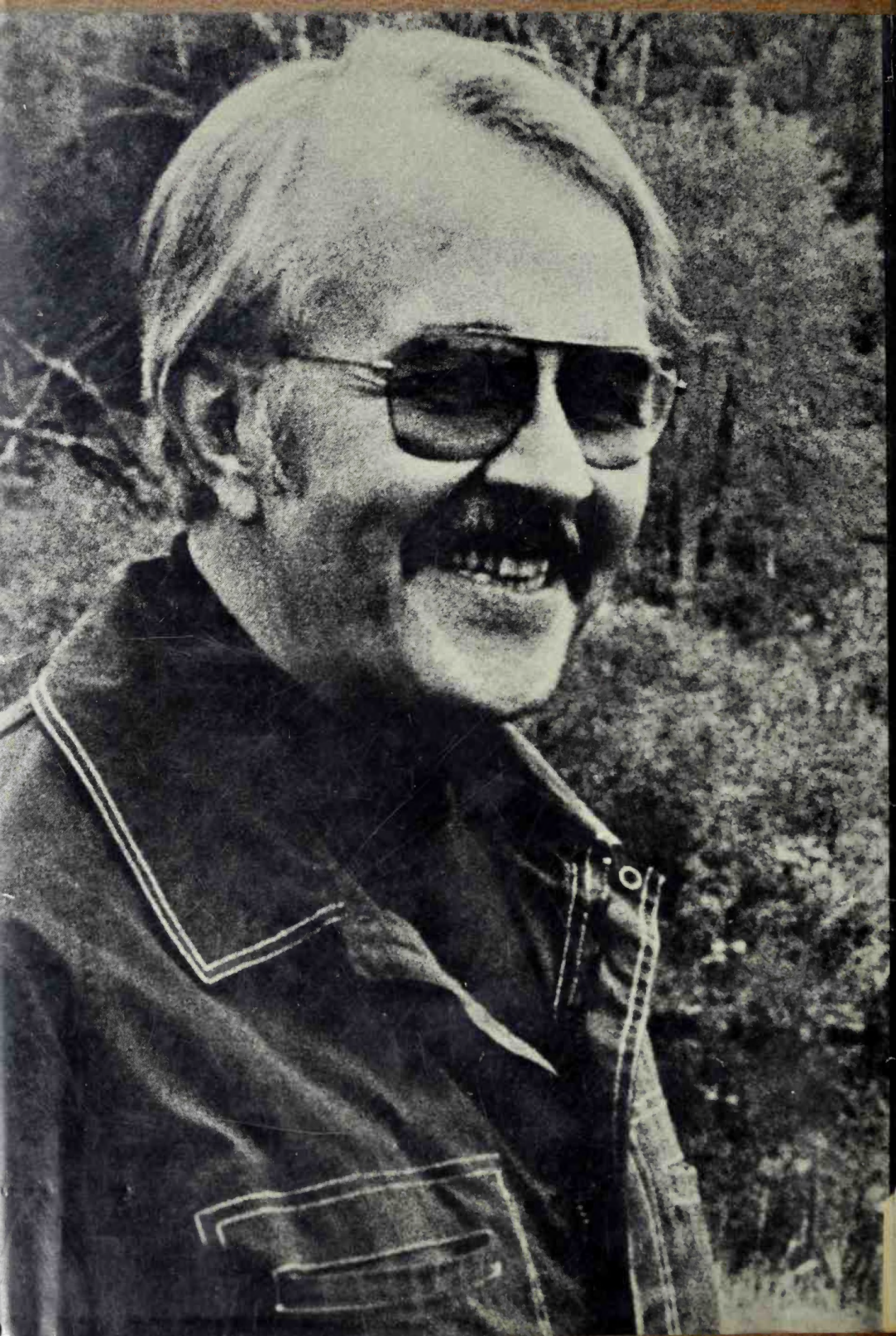
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